

Beyond Nice

by Dennis & Alynn Battaglia and Fr Rich O'Brien, C.M.
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Recently Dennis and I were challenged to go beyond just being "nice" to one another. Christ's words "love one another as I have loved you" means that I'm called to love unconditionally as God loves us. This is more than just being nice. This means I might have to look at areas that are uncomfortable to look at, to die to self a little, to put aside my feelings and to listen to my spouse. I have to step out of my comfort zone to give of myself.

This particular time, we were both holding back in our dialogue. We'd answer the question. For example, if the question was "How do I feel about the Scripture passage 'The Parable of the Sower'?" we would describe our feelings surrounding that Scripture. However, if I felt frustrated, angry or sad, or had any other "red-light" feelings that day, I would have the tendency not to mention it in the letter. We realized that this was not being intimate or responsible in our dialogue. I would keep strong, uncomfortable feelings to myself for many days. Dennis might see my feelings reflected in my body language or in my attitude, but he wouldn't really know what was going on inside of me. We made a commitment to each other to go beyond "being nice" in our dialogue and to face the red-light feelings.

Day-to-day incidents that bring up strong feelings are easy to ignore...Until they build up over time. Parenting issues can be a source of that type of daily occurrence for us. Awhile ago, we agreed that we were disgusted with cleaning up after the sunflower-seed consumers in our family. So, we made a firm policy that there would be no more sunflower seeds in our house. Then, of course, came the day when our daughter came home from the store carrying a bag of sunflower seeds. The television was on, and I presumed that she was probably eating sunflower seeds, but I just couldn't muster the energy for a confrontation, especially since it was late. So, basically, our daughter ate sunflower seeds and I knew it.

The next day Dennis confronted our daughter about the sunflower seeds, which I had already forgotten about. She came to me upset over arguing with Dennis, and I comforted her, not knowing what they had argued about. And the not-so-funny comedy of errors continued.

Later, when Dennis and I were alone in the car, he brought up the policy we had made and asked what was going on. It would have been easier to let it slide, or pretend I didn't know about it. The episode was over. But, obviously, sunflower seeds were not the real issue. Permissiveness in our parenting was the real problem, and we needed to stay on top of it, addressing the small issues as they happened. It takes consistency and persistence to clear the air and not wait until the problems are compounded. It's not always comfortable, but it keeps the barriers from building.

As Alynn stated, we are called to go beyond nice in our relationship. For me, this gets confusing at times. I've learned that I can share things that aren't pleasant or nice without judgments or superiorities. Jesus calls us always to be gentle and tender with each other. But He also calls us to be honest. This can be a difficult task at times. I know I'm not responsible for Alynn's feelings, but I am responsible to let her know how I'm feeling or how I see things in a manner that is life-giving. Especially when I know that it is a sensitive area.

The willingness to be honest with each other is absolutely necessary when we need to heal each other in our relationship. We were at a meeting a few months ago when the dialogue question "What grudges do I hold?" was proposed. Having the courage to search our hearts for a long-standing issue lead us to a hurt that was a true barrier for us.

We dialogued about an incident that my caused our separation from Alynn's family, and really took the time to explore the pain and anger we each carried. This led us to dialogue on "What feeling do I have that is most difficult to share?" Alynn shared hurt, sadness and anger over her family's behavior. She had carried these feelings around for years, because she thought she had to be strong.

She also worried that I would be even angrier with her family, and it was hard to admit to me that she still loved them and didn't want to face my anger toward them. Sometimes we see a problem as so complex, and so formidable that it seems like there's nothing we can do about it. If it can't be fixed, why talk about it? As we already know the reason we need to talk about it is to get the feelings out. We carry these strong feelings around, thinking we are protecting each other or keeping the peace, and they begin to affect everything we do.

Fr. Rich Shares: Beyond "Nice" to Outrageous Loving

In my seminary days, six of us would gather on the handball court and start hitting the ball against the wall . . . tapping it here and there, so another player could swing and warm up by placing the ball where another player could do the same thing. After awhile, someone might announce it was time to begin the game by saying "Let's play 'Guts Ball!'" That would mean no more patty-caking, no more easy plays or putting it in a convenient spot. Play to win – bang it off the bottom brick! Get that point!

On the Weekend we learn how to talk to each other by being nice - by moving our pens and making a comparison or using colorful words to convey a feeling. In spite of urgings to be honest and open, we often remain guarded and don't want to "make waves". We sometimes try to be careful not to upset anyone, even though our hearts are crying to be heard.

What would our Lord say to me if I kept dancing around, avoiding things that must be spoken if my relationship is to grow? I think He would say something "not too nice", like: "Because you are neither hot nor cold, I will begin to vomit you out of mouth!"(REV 3:15-16) YUCK! Having fire does not mean that I should not be open and honest. Risking and having confidence doesn't give me license to be rude or blast away at others. It means I will use the very heart of our relationship lifestyle and open my heart so gently and honestly that people will experience my outrageous loving in my efforts to love even more deeply.

So, when Fr. Zinger comes to me with a put-down remark, instead of reacting with a put-down of my own, I can answer with "Is there anything going on?" or "How are you feeling today?" Simply put, I don't have to let others dictate to me how I choose to respond. "Beyond nice" is my choosing to live in the "Spirit of the Weekend" that moves me to respond honestly and smoothly and in a life-giving manner.