

Chaplain's Bulletin March 19, 2023



Dear Folks,

In our Gospel, Jesus heals a blind man and enables him to see, and he sees more clearly than a lot of other people. The big question is: are we seekers of truth? Almost everyone claims to care about finding the truth, but how well we do this is another question. I'm thinking there are several obstacles that get in our way.

I suspect one thing is that we can underestimate how hard it is to know the truth. There is all sorts of information out there, and not all of it trustworthy. We can become too certain too quickly that we understand, and then become less open to new information.

Studies have shown that we tend to believe things that reinforce what we already believe and are more skeptical about things that contradict what we believe. This is called confirmation bias. (No, I don't have the references at my fingertips. You shall have to take my word for what it is worth, and I won't be offended if you doubt me). My observation is that we unconsciously put more weight on evidence that points to what we want to be true and less weight on what we don't want to be true. I expect there's a technical term for that. If our friends all believe in a certain way, the social pressure can bias us.

People used to learn about Logical fallacies: arguments that look reasonable but aren't. One is called Ad hominem, which is attacking someone personally rather than the substance of their position. There is so much of that now, and people seem to think they are accomplishing something, or maybe they are just enjoying clobbering people. Another fallacy is Post hoc ergo propter hoc ("after this therefore because of this"). Causes are tricky things to determine, and it is easy to jump to conclusions. I notice an interesting phenomenon in politics: When the people I like are in power, every good thing that happens is the direct result of their policies, and every bad thing that happens would have happened anyway and would have been worse without my people in office. When the people I don't like are in power, every bad thing that happens is the direct result of their policies, and every good thing that happens would have happened anyway and would have been better without those people in office. Have you noticed that? It seems to be pervasive. Another fallacy is undue generalization. The one time I visited Florida it was cold and rainy, but it would be a mistake to conclude that Florida is a cold and rainy state.

When we disagree: how can we dialog productively? Start by understanding the other person's point of view. So often in conversation we see people who attack a caricature of what our stated position really is, and then the conversation doesn't move forward. If we slow down our response, try to understand their point of view in the best possible light, if we can state their position as well as they can, then we are ready to speak to them productively. St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Robert Bellarmine were both famous for doing this.

I would leave you with some thoughts: We should be "quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath (James 1:19)." We remember that we only see part of the picture, and there is more to learn (1 Corinthians 13:9-13). God will not condemn us for making honest mistakes if we are truly seekers of truth (John 3:19-21). If we are mistaken about something, what would it take to get us to see it? Would we be able? Whether we are correct or mistaken, did we conduct ourselves with love?

Blessings,

Fr. Jim