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An Avenue to Transformation: Five Attributes of Fruitful Conversation

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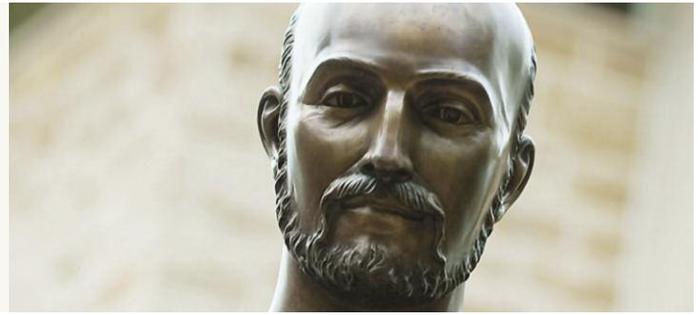
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“It should be presupposed that every good Christian ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor’s statement than to condemn it.”

Saint Ignatius (Sp.Ex. 22)



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Five Attributes of Fruitful Conversation

By Cindy Schmersal

As educators, we frequently invite students to embrace discomfort, an invitation evidenced in service-immersion experiences, challenging new ideas introduced in the classroom, and encounters with others whose realities and worldviews differ from their own. We encourage such discomfort knowing that it proves fertile ground for transformation, an essential aim of Jesuit education.

We are likewise called to continually invite our own transformation, to embrace discomfort and welcome the growth it promises. In my experience, such discomfort is most readily present in the difficult exchanges that are an unavoidable aspect of my ministry. Accompanying students as they navigate life’s messiness, engaging with colleagues whose perspectives and preferences on how to proceed differ from my own, and managing a department all present endless opportunities to grapple with discomfort and to engage with others in honesty, humility, and vulnerability.

I am a quintessential nine on the personality describing Enneagram – “the peacemaker.” Admittedly, my instinctual reaction to conflict is often to withdraw, ignoring it in the hopes that it may magically resolve itself. (Spoiler alert: it does not.) I do not willingly welcome challenging encounters. Perhaps you can relate. When faced with such circumstances, I frequently have to remind myself to embrace the discomfort it offers, knowing that past experience has proven it a space in which God’s grace and my resultant growth can abound.

In approaching difficult encounters, I am encouraged by the wisdom of St. Ignatius of Loyola. In the pre-

supposition of the Spiritual Exercises, he offers the director guidance on how to approach the directee’s sharing, guidance that can inform our own engagement with others in challenging conversations. He writes:

It should be presupposed that every good Christian ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor’s statement than to condemn it. Further, if one cannot interpret it favorably, one should ask how the other means it. If that meaning is wrong, one should correct the person with love; and if this is not enough, one should search out every appropriate means through which, by understanding the statement in a good way, it may be saved. (Sp.Ex. 22)

In short, he advises to first and foremost assume the best, to inquire further as necessary, and always to engage with love.

From this presupposition, the Rockhurst University Office of Mission and Ministry derived five attributes that mark a fruitful Ignatian conversation. I share these attributes knowing the value they continue to offer me in my ministry and in the hope that they may benefit the difficult conversations that are an inevitable aspect of the work of each of us.

Be slow to speak. In the most difficult of conversations, it is often easy to be overly reactionary, allowing hurt, anger, or frustration to fuel my approach. And so, I am reminded to pause, even if only momentarily, and to invite the Spirit’s guidance and wisdom before engaging the conversation.

Listen attentively. Defensiveness, while an easily adopted default stance, often inhibits genuine listening and true conversation. Attentive listening requires my vulnerability, my full presence and sincere openness to the other.

Seek the truth in what others are saying. No matter how fully I may wish it were otherwise at times, I am not the keeper of all truth. Every difficult conversation holds the potential to teach me something, something about the topic at hand, about the other, and, undoubtedly, about myself. I strive to learn.

Disagree humbly, respectfully, and thoughtfully. While not the keeper of all truth, as a sharer in the conversation, it is incumbent upon me to speak *my* truth in love with humility and respect.

Allow the conversation the time it needs. Resolution is not always readily apparent or feasible. Some conversations simply take time, leaving me to trust, as Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin advises, “in the slow work of God.”

As we engage the difficult conversations that are components of our life and work, may we strive to do so guided by the above attributes and always rooted in an approach that assumes the best of the other and seeks the good of all. In so doing, may we readily welcome discomfort, embracing it as an avenue to the transformation we seek as companions in Jesuit higher education.

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We Remember a Great Educator

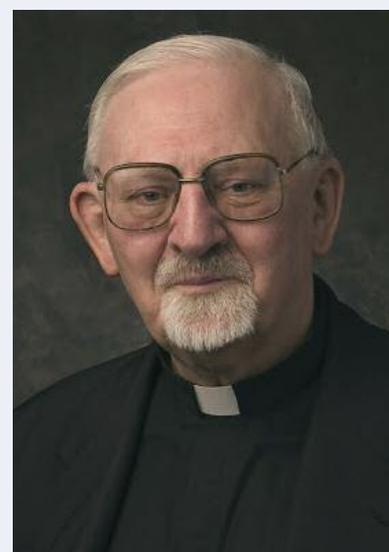
*Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.,
1928-2016*

By Edward W. Schmidt, S.J.

As the news went out of the death of the Jesuits’ former superior general, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, on November 26, 2016, in Beirut, Jesuits and others who had known him began to reflect with gratitude on his legacy. Elected superior general on September 13, 1983, during a time of marked tension in the Society’s relationship with the Vatican, he went on to serve in that office for over 24 years with quiet dignity and grace, with skillful diplomacy and competence. In 2006 he announced his desire to resign from that office as he approached his 80th birthday, and on January 8, 2008, the Jesuits’ Thirty-Fifth General Congregation accepted his resignation.

Such a bare outline hardly begins to hint at what he did for the Jesuit world, and particularly the world of Jesuit education. He was an educator. He held a doctorate in theology from the Université de Saint-Joseph in Beirut, Lebanon. He became an expert in general linguistics and in Armenian. He taught in Beirut and also in The Hague and in Paris. In 1981 he became rector of the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome.

As superior general he had a great impact on Jesuit education



and on how schools relate today to the Jesuit history, spirit, and governance. In 1989, he addressed Assembly '89, the meeting of 800 Jesuits and lay collaborators in higher education held at Georgetown to celebrate its bicentenary as the first Jesuit school in the United States. First, he noted the significance of the occasion: “This is an historic occasion: the first assembly of Jesuits from the entire spectrum of activities at all United States Jesuit institutions of higher education.”

And he continued: “The talent and dedication assembled in this room is potentially a massive resource for building the Kingdom of