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Difficult Conversations... One Bite at a Time

By Thomas Curran, S.J.



How did this elephant get into this room? I've often heard the question. Frequently, I've asked myself the same question. And, just when did we start using this expression about the overwhelming presence of this mammal in a tight space? I have found a few sources that seem to point to it becoming popular in the middle of the 20th century. Today, the question is used so frequently that it has become a cliché about something that is difficult to ignore and highly unlikely to disappear on its own. May I suggest that the question be followed by another question: what are going to do about it?

In my office, I keep a plastic elephant. It's about 10 inches long and 4 inches high. On its posterior is a tag with this inscription: one bite at a time. I lend this elephant to university personnel especially after having discussions about approaching overwhelming tasks or engaging in difficult conversations. I invite them to keep it in their possession until they have come to peace and freedom about a task, issue, or circumstance. After a while, my little plastic pachyderm is returned to me with thanks from the user.

One bite at a time. It's our way of proceeding. Seriously, in our Jesuit enterprise in higher education, we often speak about our way of proceeding. Eating that elephant, one bite at a time, captures, at least for me, how we need to approach having those difficult conversations and engaging those matters that will not disappear on their own. Groucho Marx may not have known how "the elephant got into his pajamas." And, I don't know how it came into the room. But, I do know that it cannot stay there.

As Ignatius of Loyola and his early companions were organizing the least Society, the church was engaged in the Council of Trent (1545-1563). It was attempting to address matters that needed attention and reform. These included "the uprooting of heresies" and "the reform of the clergy and the Christian people." One might say that there were more than a few elephants in the aisles of the Church.

In 1546, Ignatius sent three Jesuits to Trent to help address the matters that were

pervasive as they were delicate. He instructed the three Jesuits with these five principles: be slow to speak; listen attentively; seek the truth in what the others are saying; correct misstatements humbly and gently; and allow the conversation the time it needs.

It's the fifth principle that most find comforting and encouraging. Ignatius understood the importance and evolution of conversations. His Spiritual Exercises are filled with colloquies between the retreatant and God, Jesus, Mary, or one of the saints. He desired the conversations to be intimate and honest. He believed we express ourselves with words and listen with our hearts. He understood that some of the conversations provide more questions before they provide any answers. For him, giving the conversation the time it needs brings us to an experience in freedom.

Difficult matters, like that elephant in the room, don't go away on their own. They need to be faced honestly and with care. Our campuses need to be places where we engage the difficult questions. Our campuses need to be safe, but not comfortable places. Complacency is denying there is an elephant in the room. And, just what are some of those matters and issues whose presence needs to be acknowledged?

Race, religion, orientation, disability, gender identity, and marital status are just some of the matters that need our attention and conversations. How can we address these matters? How should we proceed? Ignatius provided the five principles of conversation to his early companions. They have worked well for close to five hundred years. Let's continue the dialogue. Yes, there are pachyderms in our parlors and on our campuses...one bite at a time.

Thomas Curran, S.J., president of Rockhurst University since 2006, was a member of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, but in late 2011 he entered a three-year transition period of formation to become a member of the Society of Jesus and made his final vows as a Jesuit in 2015.