5 Steps to Positive Political Dialogue – Discussion Questions

Step 1 – Believe that a Positive Vision of Politics Is Possible.
The first step is to get past the habitual negative attitude toward all things political. At its root, the very word “politics” suggests a seed for positive change.

1. Recall one or more heated political conversations you have had with others - in person, by phone, via email or in online discussions. Could they have turned out differently? How?

2. Consider the origins of your own political opinions. How are they a product of your circumstances (reflecting the influence of your family, culture, country)? How are they the result of your own effort, reflection, study or deliberate choice?

3. Which political leaders (past or present) seem to you to be examples of political action as, in the words of Chiara Lubich, "the love of all loves"? What characteristics make them stand out from other political leaders?

Step 2—Practice Communication Skills Based on Love
The second step outlines the dangers of communicating remotely and through social media. It proposes placing love foremost in our political discussions by using "art of loving" as a guide to communication.

1. When have you used social media to engage in political discussion? What was the result?

2. When have you talked about politics with your family, friends or co-workers? What was the result?

3. When have you had to make an unpopular decision? How did you communicate your decision to the person or persons adversely affected?

Step 3—Understand Where There is Room for Compromise—and Not.
The third step begins with these words: "The practice of love is fine and good, but what do we do given the fact that evil is at work in the world? Can we really close our eyes to the corrosive and manipulative effects of power and the loss of sacred values, and all of the ways in which human dignity is trampled? In these circumstances, might righteous anger be the best and fullest expression of love?"

1. Choose an issue where there is deep dissent and where Catholics do not have “wiggle room” (for example, abortion, euthanasia).

   Envision a conversation with someone who holds a position with which a faithful Catholic could not agree. Assume that person’s good will. How could you together find mutually suitable circumstances and solutions that would lessen the need for or the practice of the behavior which is so divisive? Are there other ways of handling things which might ameliorate the outcome of the “immoral act”?
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2. Re-read the passage from John Paul II’s Evangelium Vitae, page 29. In what areas can there be mutual agreement and constructive effort in working towards the elimination of social evils? How might you start a dialogue concerning one of these areas with the person you envisioned in strategy #1? If possible, actually engage in such dialogue with someone who does not share your perspective.

3. Some individuals and groups that hold such strong opinions on certain issues (e.g., “abortion on demand without apology,” “the traditional ‘American Right to Keep and Bear Arms,’” “the war on women”) that finding “common ground” seems impossible. If a person disagrees with their views, they treat it as “hating on them.” Is it possible to have dialogue with such individuals or groups? How would you go about it?

Step 4 – Recognize Suffering as a Springboard for Love

The fundamental question of Step 4 is: “Is my perspective on political issues grounded in an effort to love by entering into and living inside these wounds, and as much as possible, taking them on as my own?”

1. Think of a political or social issue that ties you in knots because it may hit so close to home and/or may be bound up in personal experience.

2. Who are some people affected by and suffering with regard to this issue?

3. How can we individually, collectively, and/or politically “love” these individuals and “see others as part of ourselves, taking on their burdens, making room for their questions and problems, and pulling out from them all that is positive and build upon it?”

4. Consider this passage, taken from page 40:

In Forming Consciences, the bishops note that identifying a particular action as intrinsically evil is the beginning, not the end, of a process that requires prudential reflection on the appropriate political response to a given evil. Continuing with the image of the hiking expedition, the concept of “intrinsic evil” resembles a guardrail. The guardrail does not preclude discussion about how to keep travelers from wandering too close to the edge. Nor does it preclude conversations about the effort that fellow travelers should, can, and will make to pull up those may fallen into a ravine. The guardrail itself is neither the path nor the goal of the journey.

How can an issue’s intrinsic evil be separated from the people affected by it?
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Step 5 - Build the Polis with Constructive Action

The key point in step 5 is that we should not bail out by failing to participate in the political life of the community or vote without a thorough and non-biased knowledge of the issues and how the candidates would deal with them. The chapter encourages us to be aware, be open, be engaged, be persistent and be an example.

1. Think of an instance when you or someone you know well voted against a candidate based on a single issue because that candidate’s position seemed to be in favor of an intrinsic evil? What other dimensions might there have been to that candidate’s policies? In what way could those policies have been intended to protect or foster innocent human life?

2. What value might there be in voting even when you think that your one vote would not matter?

3. In a past election, how might you have voted differently or at least with more awareness?