

Parish Directors: Managing Conflict

Conflict is not a “dirty” word. It is a process. It is inevitable, and it is a normal part of life, even when you work in the Church. As a DRE you may find yourself in conflict situations with parents, catechists, a parish board or committee or another member of the parish staff. Most conflicts result from one of the following:

- **Unclear or poor communication.** For example, calendars or schedules are not published ahead of time. Your expectations of parents or catechists are not clear.
- **Different methods or ways of doing things.** For example, you believe involvement in sacrament preparation for parents and children should be done in formal sessions at the parish. Some groups of parents believe preparation can be done in informal neighborhood faith communities.
- **Differing values.** For example, you value involvement of parents in the process of catechesis. Parents see no reason to be involved once they pay the registration fee. You value an experiential approach to catechesis. A catechist believes all catechesis should be the presentation of the facts of doctrine, with no discussion or application.

Actually, the first two types of conflicts can be managed if both parties are willing. The first is easier than the second. But the third situation cannot be managed because it is a conflict of values. The first rule of conflict management is to clarify which kind of conflict is occurring.

Before engaging, ask the following questions:

- **How important is it to you?** Is the relationship or the issue of value to you? For example, if the issue is a belief, value, or rule you believe in, or are expected to enforce, then engaging in the conflict is necessary. If the relationship and the issue are both important to you, there is an even more compelling reason to engage in the conflict.
- **Have you thought about the consequences?** Ask yourself what the anticipated consequences might be if you engage in the conflict. Is there a risk of making the situation worse, or an opportunity to improve the relationship or outcome? Many times people engage in conflict and are surprised by the negative outcome. Be sure to think about possible consequences, both positive and negative, before engaging in or avoiding a conflict.
- **Are you ready for the consequences?** After analyzing potential consequences, determine whether you are prepared for the consequences of engaging in the conflict. For example, what if, as a result of engaging in a conflict, you lost a catechist or your job? If you anticipate the outcome, consider and believe strongly enough about the issue, you will be prepared for whatever the outcome. Most results of engaging in conflict are not this serious, but these examples illustrate the value of thinking through consequences.
- **What are the consequences if you do not engage in the conflict?** Sometimes we engage in conflict for all the right reasons. We want to affirm our values, ideas, beliefs, or morals. If avoiding a conflict means sacrificing a core belief, we need to consider that, and reflect on the consequences of evading the conflict. When that is not the case, there may be good reasons to avoid engaging in conflict.

Keep in mind, that to make conflict constructive, you should listen actively in order to balance the interests of each of you. Make it your goal to maximize the opportunity for mutual gain. This involves some creativity, but if you focus on the process and not just the outcome you want, you may be pleasantly surprised at the result.