

A woman with long blonde hair is seen from behind, holding hands with another person on a bridge. The background is a bright, sunny day with a clear sky and a railing on the right side of the bridge.

BUILDING BRIDGES

A conversation
with
Fr. James Martin, SJ

“*In a world so torn apart by rivalry, anger, and hatred, we have the privileged vocation to be living signs of a love that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds.*”

HENRI NOUWEN

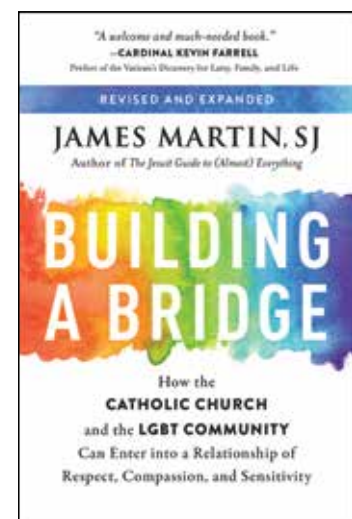
Some of us might remember the Coca Cola commercial from the 1970s that featured people of various shapes, sizes, ages and races singing about teaching the world to sing in 'perfect harmony'. It was incredibly popular and the actual song hit the top of the charts. That desire for unity and harmony seems especially acute today. Yet we see so much obvious divisiveness in the world today. Perhaps we contribute to this disharmony when we stand up for or defend something that is important to us. It is easy in today's rapid response society, where the digital culture dominates, to respond without listening, often without really thinking deeply about what we say or how we react.

As humans, we like to compartmentalize things. It helps us organize our lives and confine things that challenge what we believe. We may even separate our religious values from our day-to-day life – to proclaim one thing on Sunday in church, but then live and act differently in the workplace or on social media the rest of the week. It's natural to think about ourselves and those we care about, but not so easy to consider decisions that affect a broader group of people. How often do we think about those who are strangers or different from us – those in this country who are living in fear of being deported, the thousands of migrants and refugees in the world who are seeking a better life, or those of both genders who are excluded from the church for their sexual identity?

Issues of importance often raise significant debate. It's good that people care so deeply. But we need to challenge ourselves to debate not for the sake of winning an argument, but in order to discern the best course of action for the common good. Perhaps a worthy place for all debate to start is with our core belief in the Gospel message that all people are created in the image of God. We all share

the same human nature and we are all called to values and practices that honor the dignity and rights of all people, especially those who are often the least able to honor themselves. Jesus went as far as challenging us to "love our enemies". Admittedly this is easier said than done, especially on social media where comments have little consequence and attacks on the person, not the opinion, is the norm. But there are people who are doing it right.

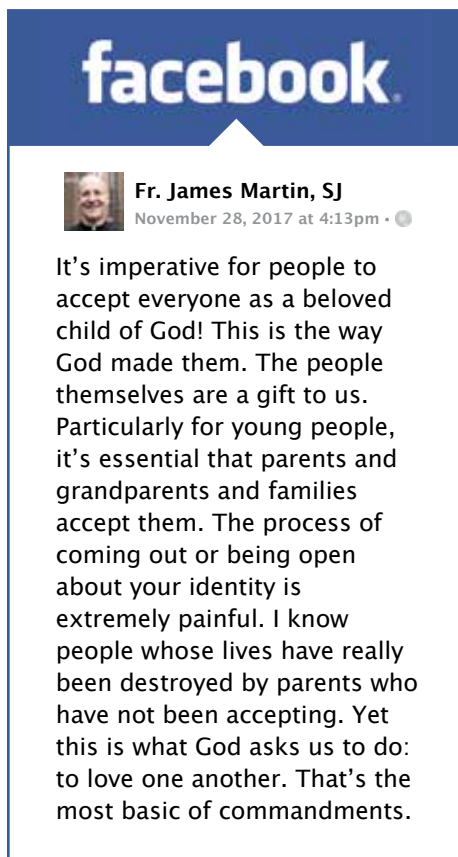
One such person is **Father James Martin, SJ**, who routinely demonstrates how to have civil discourse and positive communication on social media. We interviewed him to get his take on the polarization that is so rampant in our country today, and get his tips for engaging in more civil dialogue. Fr. Martin is committed to sharing and communicating Jesus' message of inclusivity and love; to speaking the truth, confronting social injustice, and initiating conversations in the church and public arena via his writing and posts on social media. He invites readers and followers to engage in civil discourse. These conversations are not always easy, but neither are the issues of our times. When asked



his mission, Fr. Martin answered with one word: "Jesus". What, in these times, would Jesus stand for? "If his life is any indication it would be the poor and the marginalized," Fr. Martin said. "More importantly, how would Jesus engage with others? Perhaps by listening, responding with compassion and strength, and speaking the truth." As a follower of Jesus and a modern day prophet, Fr. Martin tries to do both. And, like Jesus, he faces criticism, doubt, and challenges for speaking up and inviting conversation on difficult issues of our day. After his recent book, *Building a Bridge*, was published, he was uninvited

Fr. Martin's book, *Building a Bridge*, and subsequent social media posts address the Church's attitude and treatment of LGBTQ people. When asked why he thinks this issue is an important one in today's church and why he is addressing it knowing he won't be popular with some people, he simply replied, "They are the most marginalized people in our church – ignored, excluded and in many cases, mistreated."

"Jesus asks us to go out to people on the margins and Pope Francis has asked the Jesuits to go out to people on the margins and peripheries," he continued. "There is an urgent need for us to reach out to these people who are excluded from their own church." In a Facebook post related to the topic of his newest book, Fr. Martin responded:



facebook

Fr. James Martin, SJ
November 28, 2017 at 4:13pm • ●

It's imperative for people to accept everyone as a beloved child of God! This is the way God made them. The people themselves are a gift to us. Particularly for young people, it's essential that parents and grandparents and families accept them. The process of coming out or being open about your identity is extremely painful. I know people whose lives have really been destroyed by parents who have not been accepting. Yet this is what God asks us to do: to love one another. That's the most basic of commandments.

Just like social media brings us together, it can divide us. We only look at the things we are most comfortable looking at.

FR. JAMES MARTIN, SJ

Although the book has generated controversy, support for Fr. Martin has come from inside and outside the Church, with many priests and bishops publicly offering statements that indicate their own openness to discourse and action on the matter.

We asked Fr. Martin if he considers himself a prophet, especially about building bridges of compassion, sensitivity and respect among diverse and divisive groups. "Well, we're all prophets, right? We're all baptized 'priest, prophet and ruler.' So, yes, I hope I'm a prophet, as I hope every Christian is a prophet," he said. Being prophetic in today's world seems to call for loving people who feel like your enemies and praying for people who feel like your persecutors. In Fr. Martin's case, it's not about picking sides. It's about listening and trying to help people find where Jesus and the Holy Spirit are present and leading us. It encourages us to practice treating each other with respect that allows for dialogue that leads to somewhere productive. Fitting of the title of his book, communication as ministry calls us to be bridge builders, to engage in meaningful discussion and discourse, and to encourage dialogue that might strengthen our faith and awaken us to new or renewed ways of acting on behalf of people in need.

So how do we help to support those on the margins, ensure

Fr. Martin offers these key elements for civil discourse:

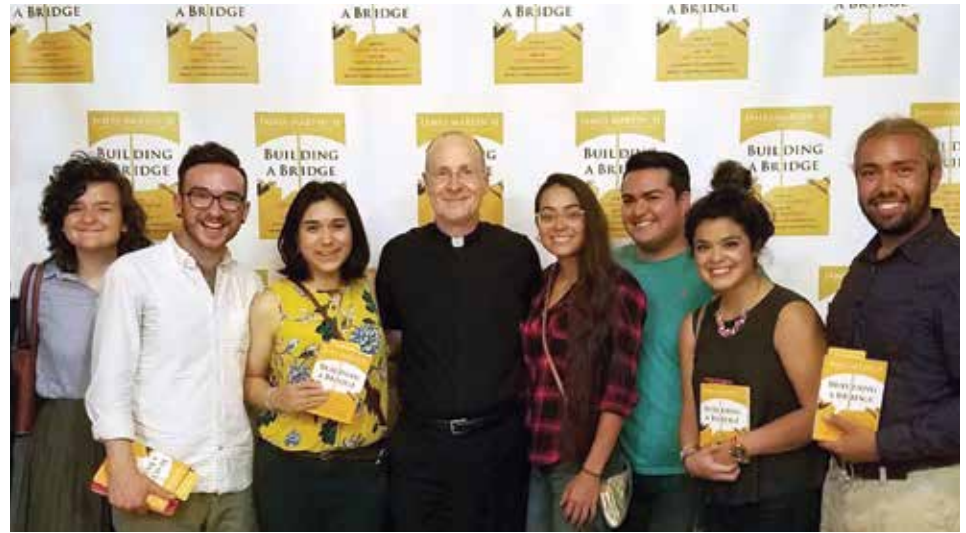
- 1 Be willing to give people the benefit of the doubt, from the beginning
- 2 Be willing to listen, to learn, and be open to finding out something different
- 3 Be willing to be charitable
- 4 Be willing to be corrected
- 5 Be willing to be surprised or confused (Often our first reaction is to attack it or say it can't be true)



their voices are heard and engage in civil discourse? Fr. Martin says the most important things are to listen to them, befriend them, allow them to tell us what they need, advocate for them and be willing to suffer for them. Specifically related to the LGBTQ community, he offers the examples of Cardinal Joseph Tobin who sponsored a welcoming Mass for LGBTQ people in the Archdiocese of Newark, and Cardinal Blasé Cupich who has planned listening sessions in the Archdiocese of Chicago.

“It starts with listening to the people on the margins,” he said. “Just like in the Gospels when Jesus meets Bartimaeus, the blind beggar of Jericho and says, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Jesus didn’t just heal him. He listened to him and asked about his desires.”

Fr. Martin says he’s learned a lot from just listening. He encourages us to see people as individuals with different hopes and struggles, and not clump people into groups with attached stereotypes. Perhaps this is one of our challenges – to risk asking someone what they need and



▲ Fr. Martin at the “Building A Bridge” book launch in Hoboken, NJ.

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responding without judgment. What if we start by listening to and coming in contact with someone different than us? What if we search together for truth and insights from different vantage points? What might we gain in greater understanding by engaging with people who are not like us or who think differently than us?

We might ask ourselves the following: In my conversations and interactions with others, have I listened without pre-judging? Have I responded with truth in a compassionate way? Have I found a way to build a bridge for someone on the margins? ■



Fr. James Martin, SJ, is a Jesuit priest, editor at large of America Magazine, author of several books and consultor to the Vatican’s Secretariat of Communications. He has written for many publications and is a regular guest speaker and commentator in the media on Twitter and Facebook. Before entering the Jesuits in 1988, he graduated from Wharton School of Business and worked for General Electric. After publishing his book, My Life with the Saints, in 2006, Martin was encouraged by his publisher at Loyola Press to begin a public Facebook page. While Martin sees Facebook as a natural outgrowth of his ministry, in a recent interview, he said he resisted it at first, afraid that it would take up too much of his time. He soon learned that was not the case. It became an outlet for him to share information and to engage with people. For some, Facebook is a hobby, for Martin it is a tool and one of the main media of his ministry today. He also continues to write books, and use Twitter and Instagram to share information and engage with people.