The Mormon Ethic of Civility

The political world is astir. Economies are faltering. Public trust is waning. Individuals feel vulnerable. And social cohesion wears thin. Meanwhile, stories of rage and agitation fill our airwaves, streets and town halls. Where are the voices of balance and moderation in these extreme times? During a recent address given in an interfaith setting, Church President Thomas S. Monson declared: "When a spirit of goodwill prompts our thinking and when united effort goes to work on a common problem, the results can be most gratifying." Further, former Church President Gordon B. Hinckley once said that living "together in communities with respect and concern one for another" is "the hallmark of civilization." That hallmark is under increasing threat.

So many of the habits and conventions of modern culture — ubiquitous media, anonymous and unsourced online participation, politicization of the routine, fractured community and family life — undermine the virtues and manners that make peaceful coexistence in a pluralist society possible. The fabric of civil society tears when stretched thin by its extremities. Civility, then, becomes the measure of our collective and individual character as citizens of a democracy.

A healthy democracy maintains equilibrium through diverse means, including a patchwork of competing interests and an effective system of governmental checks. Nevertheless, this order ultimately relies on the integrity of the people. Speaking at general conference, a semiannual worldwide gathering of the Church, Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles asserted: "In the end, it is only an internal moral compass in each individual that can effectively deal with the root causes as well as the symptoms of societal decay." Likewise, Presiding Bishop H. David Burton emphasized that the virtues of fidelity, charity, generosity, humility and responsibility "form the foundation of a Christian life and are the outward manifestation of the inner man." Thus, moral virtues blend into civic virtues. The seriousness of our common challenges calls for an equally serious engagement with reasonable ideas and solutions. What we need is rigorous debate, not rancorous altercations.

Civility is not only a matter of discourse. It is primarily a mode of engagement. The technological interconnectedness of society has made isolation impossible. Of all the institutions in the modern world, religion has had perhaps the greatest difficulty adjusting to the reality of give and take with the public. Today, and throughout its history, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continuously encounters the legitimate interests of various stakeholders in its interaction with the public. Rather than exempting itself from the rules of law and civility, the Church has sought the path of cooperative engagement and avoided the perils of acrimonious confrontation.

Echoing this mode of civil engagement, President Monson declared: "As a church we reach out not only to our own people but also to those people of goodwill throughout the world in that spirit of brotherhood which comes from the Lord Jesus Christ." Speaking of civility on a personal level, Elder Robert D. Hales of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught Latter-day Saints how to respond to criticism: "Some people mistakenly think responses such as silence, meekness, forgiveness, and bearing humble testimony are passive or weak. But, to 'love [our] enemies, bless them that curse [us], do good to them that hate [us], and pray for them which despitefully use [us], and persecute [us]' (Matthew 5:44) takes faith, strength, and, most of all, Christian courage."

The moral basis of civility is the Golden Rule, taught by a broad range of cultures and individuals, perhaps most popularly by Jesus Christ: "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise" (Luke 6:31). This ethic of reciprocity reminds us all of our responsibility toward one another and reinforces the communal nature of human life.

Similarly, the Book of Mormon tells a sober story of civilizational decline in which various peoples repeat the cycle of prosperity, pride and fall. In almost every case, the seeds of decay begin with the violation of the simple rules of civility. Cooperation, humility and empathy gradually give way to contention, strife and malice.

The need for civility is perhaps most relevant in the realm of partisan politics. As the Church operates in countries around the world, it embraces the richness of pluralism. Thus, the political diversity of Latter-day Saints spans the ideological spectrum. Individual members are free to choose their own political philosophy and affiliation. Moreover, the Church itself is not aligned with any particular political ideology or movement. It defies category. Its moral values may be expressed in a number of parties and ideologies.

Furthermore, the Church views with concern the politics of fear and rhetorical extremism that render civil discussion impossible. As the Church begins to rise in prominence and its members achieve a higher public profile, a diversity of voices and opinions naturally follows. Some may even mistake these voices as being authoritative or representative of the Church. However, individual members think and speak for themselves. Only the First Presidency and the Twelve Apostles speak for the whole Church.

Latter-day Saint ethical life requires members to treat their neighbors with respect, regardless of the situation. Behavior in a religious setting should be consistent with behavior in a secular setting. The Church hopes that our democratic system will facilitate kinder and more reasoned exchanges among fellow Americans than we are now seeing. In his inaugural press conference President Monson emphasized the importance of cooperation in civic endeavors: "We have a responsibility to be active in the communities where we live, all Latter-day Saints, and to work cooperatively with other churches and organizations. My objective there is ... that we eliminate the weakness of one standing alone and substitute for it the strength of people working together."