A Frightened People

I know. “Frightened” is a provocative term. It evokes many feelings and reactions. It demands asking why a person or a group feels that way. It invites analysis into the causes and consequences of situations that are frightening.

Let me say it at the outset: Many, perhaps millions, of Hispanics are frightened. Yes, today, in the United States of America, many of our Hispanic Catholic sisters and brothers live in a permanent state of fear. The Collins Dictionary says this about the word “frightened”: “If you are frightened, you are anxious or afraid, often because of something that has just happened or that you think may happen.”

The definition captures well what I hear increasingly from many Hispanics in my travels throughout the United States. Their reasons to be frightened are many, and I do not pretend to exhaust them in a short column, yet allow me to mention a few.

Countless Hispanic children and spouses, mostly women, are frightened when faced with the deportation of a loved one who provides for them. It is frightening to know that one’s family may be separated and perhaps never reunited.

It is frightening when many Hispanic children and spouses, those who may end up in the foster care system and never see their family again, and brothers live in a permanent state of fear. In some states, many Hispanics whose migration status is irregular are frightened with the deportation of a loved one who has made sacrifices to bring them to the United States. Their lives will be disrupted if the program ends abruptly, forcing them to return to countries where they have not lived for long — and many do not even know.

Many Hispanics, immigrant and U.S.-born, are frightened as we witness our society grow too comfortable with boats of anti-Hispanic rhetoric and even actions. Our well-being — and that of our children — is at stake.

Hispanics are frightened when unusually questioned — twice, thrice, more — for what we do. It is frightening to live and work in environments when one’s efforts are not trusted or never considered good enough.

In some states, many Hispanics whose migration status is irregular are frightened and avoid going to church, restaurants or malls. Many even avoid stepping outside of their homes for fear of being targeted by immigration or law enforcement officers.

It is frightening for many Hispanic Catholics to realize that some of their pastoral leaders are guided more by partisan politics and ideology than by a commitment to Gospel-inspired pastoral care. Sometimes they receive the scraps of what is offered to other Catholics; other times they are not even welcomed. Although such negative examples are not the norm, they do exist.

All circumstances leading people to live in a permanent state of fear constitute a direct affront to their dignity as children of God and to their most essential rights as human beings.

Nearly two-thirds of Hispanics are Roman Catholic. The fear of these sisters and brothers is the fear of the Church in this country. We need to talk about these matters as a community of faith. Being Catholic in the U.S. demands standing in solidarity with those who are frightened because after living in this country for decades, forming families and contributing to this society, their lives will be disrupted if the program ends abruptly, forcing them to return to countries where they have not lived for long — and many do not even know.

Unprofessional conversations or disrespectful discussions are never mandated. Words that verbally drip with sarcasm impede issue-oriented debates and can cause actual, physical stress. Not that polemics need be shallow. As Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor said, “Being polite should not be mistaken for being afraid.” We can always agree to disagree during policy debates, but “little said is easily mended” is still profound and accurate.

In the honorable quest for civility, we would do well to monitor our own phrasing and determine the subliminal messages we send, whether or not intended. Some common phrases carry subtle but insulting implications. For example:

With all due respect, follow me?
Do you follow me?
Really and truthfully...
Fairly (or really) unique
Gave 110% effort

“With all due respect...” Said usually when respect is neither given nor due.
“Do you follow me?” Thanks for asking if I’m stupid.
“Really and truthfully...” Prepare to be insulted. (Best used with #1 above.)
“Fairly (or really) unique” But unique is unique.
“Gave 110% effort” Can’t be done.

“Regardless — irregardless” “Regardless” and “irregardless” are real words, synonymous; “irregardless” is not. But, if someone needs to negate “irregardless,” a friend suggests the non-word: “disirregardless.”

I literally...
Fill in the blank: died laughing; could eat a horse; lost my mind. In all honesty, some ugly scenes get conjured up, none of which could possibly be true, even with 110% effort, and disirregardless of how really unique the situation is. With all due respect, follow me?

With election campaigns recently passed but seemingly always upon us, we may not be able to control political invective, but we can resolve to engage in policy-centered, substantive debates that cast more light than heat on issues. In our haste to cleverly lash out at those with whom we disagree, a slight pause, a deep breath, and disengaging the attack mode may be difficult. But we are called to be better than that. We can be civil. We can be kind.

Sure feels good to get all that off my chest.