



What does MILDNESS/GENTLENESS mean as a fruit of the Spirit – including in the context of work – and what can be done to make it actionable?

The fruits of the Holy Spirit are the signs and actions that the Holy Spirit is alive within us and helping us live by faith in our daily lives.

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The Most Reverend Joel M. Konzen, S.M., Auxiliary Bishop of Atlanta, shared thoughts and discussed this with those present during the BELIEVES session held on Tuesday, November 8, 2022.

Bishop Konzen, who is originally from Toledo, Ohio, and goes back there every summer to have Mass with his cousins and relatives, originally studied to be a priest in the Toledo diocese, only later switching to Atlanta.

He has been with the Marists since 1975 and in the education space in Catholic high schools for 34 years – 31 of those as president or principal.

For him, the fruits of the Spirit aren't entirely distinct.

“Looking at last month's fruit of the Spirit – kindness – as an example, it doesn't really start or stop. Each is some part of the other,” he said. “I like to think of it in terms of Myers-Briggs, where the goal is to come close to the center not at the periphery, and taking weaker areas and growing there, not just sticking with the areas shown as strengths. My whole life is a project about melding the differences and embracing the areas I am least comfortable & proficient in.”

Referring to Romans 12, Bishop Konzen, who has been a bishop since 2018, said the fruits of the Spirit are complimentary and work alongside the gifts of the Spirit.

“We can see these fruits (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control) at work in what we know of Jesus, in Mary, and, often, in the saints—no surprise, since the Spirit was very much at work in Jesus, Mary, saints.”

He then asked the audience, “If I look at Jesus, where do I see kindness? Think about the woman who committed adultery. There's kindness just in the waiting – waiting until everyone goes away. Then He says, ‘Here's what I heard ... Go away and do it no more.’”

Secondly, Bishop Konzen pointed out that Jesus does it in parables – instructing those around him with them over and over again – truly wanting them to be self-sufficient. He added that Jesus also does it with children, showing us how we should act.

“You put yourself last – an aggressive humility that breeds a spirit of gentleness,” remarked Bishop Konzen. “You see how Jesus deals with His accusers (It’s you who said it.”). There’s a humble acceptance of where this is all going.”

Bishop Konzen told everyone he’s had times where he had to let kids know they needed to leave a school, and also times when he’s had to do the same with employees. He said there are two ways to – they accept it, or they cause raucous.

“I think this is part of another fruit – longanimity,” he commented.

Tied to longanimity, he believes we are to accept some setback is a part of life rather than to be resisted with lawsuits and loud rebukes.

“We don’t get to win at everything in life,” he remarked further. “This leads to gentleness.”

One saint Bishop Konzen felt it was notable to mention when thinking of gentleness is St. Francis, due to his appreciation of creatures and God’s creation.

“Whether you’re a global warming fancier or denier, having some sort of appreciation for God as Creator and His creation is some form of gentleness.”

Bishop Konzen also believes the examples of Teresa of Avila and Therese the Little Flower opening up about their encounters with God invites us to do the same, as well as Mother Teresa in her care of the poor and dying. In his opinion, there is nothing weak in any of these – they were strong of will but dependent on prayer and the Eucharist, where they learned to trust and not to fear.

How then, can gentleness be exercised in leadership?

“The value of gentleness, as long as it’s accompanied by decisiveness and general organizational structure, is that it works and inspires confidence and trust.

Trust and confidence are not the same, he believes.

“Trust is a little deeper, which makes so many things possible in an organization. If you have to pick just one—go with trust over confidence because it’s the bond.”



To aid in the exercise of cultivating gentleness in leadership and work in relation to others, Bishop Konzen, believes there are nine behaviors to focus on in particular.

First, is prayer.

“This means doing the right thing and keeping your cool,” he said. “It’s action #1 to maintain gentleness.”

Next is a willingness to listen, which he thinks is very close to what gentleness is today.

“Shouting someone down doesn’t lead to anything that lasts,” he said. “Queen Elizabeth was revered for her constancy. Sometimes she had impact without saying anything at all. We undervalue listening.”

For him personally, he said that one way he does this is never celebrating any Mass without a period of silence.

He then added, “We have to listen more than value the sound of our own words that we say.”

Third among the behaviors is an appreciation for obedience.

In Bishop Konzen’s opinion, we live in a world where this has been thrown out.

Why is this significant?

“The willingness to listen is related to obedience, a reality that we have buried in a great desire to liberate everyone from the need to obey,” he remarked. “If there’s no obedience then there’s no authority, and without authority, then there’s anarchy.”

Bishop Konzen believes, we can’t say we take the Commandments seriously if we cannot value obedience.

“This is where we have to shed some unfavorable light on social media. It has exalted the role of opinion over fact and over civil discourse attempting to find common answers/solutions.”

The fourth behavior Bishop Konzen mentioned is a concern for another’s emotional or physical well-being.

“We use the term safe a lot today. This is not a bad thing. After food, water, and air, safety is next, according to Maslow. A lack of silence, and violence, threatens physical well-being.”

Next on the list is courtesy.

For him, this means putting ourselves after another, and it’s doing so in small things – even in grammar.

“‘You and I’ puts others first, not ‘Me and my cousin,’” he pointed out. “There’s a reason we have rules in grammar. A culture of affirmation and respect comes from this. This should be treated not just as another nice thing, but it’s the glue of society. We should work with young people to develop courtesy consciously, again in small things like asking someone in need if they’re hungry, lifting a bag, or holding a door.”

Sixth on the list of Bishop Konzen’s nine behaviors to exercise gentleness is openness.

This starts with not being wedded to everything as it has been or is, he believes.

“We have to trust the Spirit will lead us when we’re asked to test something.”

He added that a minor crisis we have today revolves around the seeming need for absolute certainty in decisions.

“Instead, we should try to cultivate an openness in what’s around us – and specifically in prayer,” Bishop Konzen told everyone.

Next on the list of behaviors at #7, is to not be undone by resistance or being misunderstood.

From his experience and discernment, he believes we should expect some level of opposition.

“Just because everyone’s doing it doesn’t mean it’s what you should do, or is the right thing, and if you’re misunderstood, you carefully explain where you’re coming from, as Jesus did.”

Coming in at #8, is a willingness to apologize for mistakes or offenses.

“Are we big enough to go back and say, ‘You know, I’ve been thinking about what I said yesterday and need to take that back,’” Bishop Konzen said. “This requires courtesy, courage, and humility. We have to set things right that we’ve upset. We have to take responsibility and repair what was upset.”

Finally, the last behavior Bishop Konzen believes must be focused on to exercise gentleness involves judgement.

“I don’t want to say, ‘Avoid judgements.’ We make them throughout our lives. What a gentle person does is avoids unfounded judgements – the kind that are made up or have no real evidence to support, such as ‘She looks like she would do this or that.’”

Other examples of unfounded judgement in Bishop Konzen's opinion would be to make comments such as, "He once said X and therefore he can't be trusted," or "Another person has told me she's wary of this person and doesn't know why."

"These are the unfounded judgements we need to work to correct," Bishop Konzen mentioned.

Then he added, "Experts say we make judgements within 15 seconds of meeting others. We need to give people a chance to share and prove themselves."

Having shared the nine behaviors he believes we should all focus on to exercise gentleness in leadership, Bishop Konzen began to conclude his remarks, first by speaking about the rule of thumb to want access to or be in close contact with an aide whose temperament is not like yours.

"I'm pretty calm and not likely to light things on fire," he said. "I think I could call myself gentle (except when I'm behind the wheel—something I bring to my spiritual director). I benefit from having people around me who are a little bit more insistent and step in, without being asked, to offer a potent idea, which I often benefit from. It's the foil to my gentleness, to have a St. Paul or a Joan of Arc around who will say what you might need to hear, in all your gentleness. So much of life is balance – tapping into both what's calm and urgent. In the end, we model, teach, and applaud/appreciate gentleness."

Bishop Konzen was then asked, "You mentioned aggressive humility. What's the obstacle to this?"

"It's the prayer of a lifetime," he answered. "I think praying for some of these other attributes are things we can do – not to immediately jump in but go around and see what others think. We pray for the abilities to take that 'shadow side' so we're not just one thing."

Finally, Bishop Konzen was asked one additional question before the session concluded, asking if he could give an example where he had to practice gentleness and it was difficult.

"I think one of the easiest is when they've done something wrong," responded Bishop Konzen. "You can either let them have it – which they're expecting – but sometimes the best thing to do is just listen, and ask questions like 'What do you think you did?' and 'Why do you think you did that?'"

He added, "The punishment isn't lessened, they're going to get it, but they feel heard and like they're put back together and whole."