

One of the tensions we've always had, but that frankly seems to be more noticeable in recent years, is that of division.

Now on the one hand, there will always be division in the world, and that's not a bad thing at all. We have our own likes and dislikes; we think differently and have different preferences. And as Catholics, we believe there is a distinctiveness to our faith and what we believe. This means we can't be afraid to argue and defend the faith.

But sometimes there can be divisions that aren't healthy; where we look down on people and separate ourselves, both within our world, our country, and our church. And yet Paul says in our second reading today that he urges his flock at Corinth: ***“that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose.”*** What happens when we really take those words of Paul to heart and work together, try to find common ground, and respond to others with compassion and tolerance? The answer is we get closer to the peaceful unity of humanity God envisions and our Church teaches in the Second Vatican Council, which stated a fundamental mission of the Church is to be

the ***“sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all people.”***

A few years ago, this vision unfolded in Knoxville, Tennessee, just a few days before Christmas 2017. Dozens gathered at the Nativity scene at the First Baptist Church in downtown to march to nearby Market Square to hold a rally and a vigil to “welcome the stranger,” a Christian call to treat friends, neighbors, strangers and even enemies with love and compassion. One of the people there was Yassin Terou, a refugee who came to Knoxville in 2011 and has since become a beloved local celebrity.

But he was not beloved by all.

A man in the crowd was yelling at anyone who would listen that immigrants were preventing him from getting a job. When it was Terou’s turn to speak at the rally, he invited the man up on stage so they could hold the US flag, which the man was holding, high together. When the man refused, Terou went into the crowd to find him so he could introduce himself and offer to buy him dinner so they could talk.

He also offered the man a job. Terou is the owner and operator of Yassin's Falafel House, which employs 30 people and has been open for the past four years.

"I always do that," Terou told Reader's Digest which published a story on the event. "I always invite anyone who hates us to the store. I want them to know us more. When you break bread, you break hate."

Terou is a refugee, an immigrant, and a Muslim. In Knoxville, Terou has been given a shot at the American dream, and was welcomed by the community. His restaurants are safe places for everyone, powerful engines of charity, and symbols of the best of America. That's why Yassin's Falafel House was named on the "Nicest Places in America" list by Reader's Digest.

"I'm not here just to make falafel and make money," Terou said. "I'm here to build this community."

Terou is likely the first immigrant, refugee, or Muslim that many of his customers and fellow Knoxvilleans have met—yet he embodies their closely

held belief that all people are created equal and deserve a basic level of dignity and respect. He is also a reminder that these values aren't good because they come from Knoxville; good people everywhere hold them.

At the downtown location, folks have made Yassin's one of the most popular places to eat. Terou supports his customers and many of the causes important to them. In West Knoxville, which is more conservative than the city center, the store is even more popular and profitable. It all comes down to Terou's message, which is perfectly captured in the sign outside of each Yassin's location. The sign reads: "Welcome: All sizes, all colors, all ages, all sexes, all cultures, all types of religions, all beliefs, all peoples are safe here at Yassin's Falaffel House."

At any given lunch hour, you'll see at the restaurant different people sharing meals together, from all walks of life.

In January 2017, Terou was invited by the youth pastor at First Baptist to talk to a group of kids at an "in-home retreat," a weekend of socializing and learning, about neighbors and how we should treat them. Terou went to his usual playbook and cooked the group a huge meal and then told them

about his life. Prior to that weekend, some of the students and families thought of refugees as these folks who were in some way dangerous. But through meeting the kids and sharing his story, that attitude changed.

Even on the most hectic days in his restaurants, Terou doesn't run out of smiles. Drocella Mugorewera, executive director of Bridge Refugee Services, a non-profit in Knoxville that helps refugees rebuild their lives in Eastern Tennessee, repeats the word that's often mentioned when talking about Terou: "He wants everybody to feel welcomed." This goes for his employees too.

Terou, who now employs 30 people at his two locations, has also hired ex-convicts, people struggling with drug addiction, and women fleeing dangerous situations. The local YWCA, which provides shelter for 58 women who are overcoming addiction and other difficult situations, is right across the street. One of the biggest obstacles to recovery and independence is having a job that provides dignity and an income.

Terou and all of his employees share this "pay-it-forward" attitude, making Yassin's Falafel House a hub for charitable works.

In November 2016, fires ripped through the Smoky Mountain town of Gatlinburg, killing 14 and damaging or destroying 2,500 homes and businesses. The night of the worst suffering, Terou couldn't sleep, worrying for the people of Gatlinburg, just an hour away. He stayed up until past midnight, texting with friends in the community about what to do. The next day, he rented a huge moving van and put the call out to his customers and friends to bring supplies to help the victims of the fire. By the early afternoon, the truck was loaded with water, food, and other essentials.

Yassin's Falafel House has also held fundraisers for community causes, donating a percentage of the profits of each falafel sold. When fundraising for Bridge Refugee Services, the line was out the door and around the block; Yassin's ran out of pita but didn't stop selling food for the cause until everyone had been served.

When he won a local Rotary Club Peace Award in May 2018 for his charitable work, he donated the \$1,000 prize to the Seeds of Abraham, a local nonprofit that brings together youth from different faiths to build connections that lead to understanding and peace.

In fact, Terou has been “paying-it-forward” ever since he arrived in Knoxville.

Terou was born in Syria in 1983. But things got worse over the years there, with revolution leading to a war in which some 400,000 people have been killed, according to U.N. estimates. Many people Terou knew are now missing or dead. He fled having been a critic of the government there and a target of the secret police.

Terou came to Knoxville in 2011, knowing little English or much about life in America. Some of our customs were confusing to him—but he knew right away that he was in a nice place. On his first day in town, the locally beloved University of Tennessee’s football stadium was packed for a game. People smiled at him as he passed for no reason he could understand—now he knows that’s just how folks are in Knoxville.

But life for Terou in his new home still wasn’t easy. After filing the proper papers to legally obtain employment, Terou couldn’t find work. He wanted a job. He asked if he could sell sandwiches outside the Mosque on Friday

after services. Every week he would sell out of sandwiches. Even locals who didn't worship at the Mosque were buying them. That's when Nadeem Siddiqi, who would become Terou's business partner, knew he was witnessing something special.

He gave him space in a building he had, and the two opened the first location in 2014 and the second in 2018. Two more stores are planned for 2019.

People being people, there have been a few bumps on the way.

One morning, Terou received a disturbing message from a friend: The "Safe Place" sign outside of the downtown Yassin's location had been vandalized with a white supremacist sticker. The friend, a long-time customer, spotted the hate-symbol sticker and snapped a picture of it to send to Terou before scraping it off. Perhaps Terou would need it to file a police report, he thought.

But he didn't call the police. He didn't even think about pressing charges. He did what he has always done when confronted with hate—he countered

it with love. Terou gathered customers, many now friends, outside his restaurant and talked about how he wanted to sit down for a meal with the white supremacists who did it, so they could learn to get along.

It was named one of the Nicest Places in America by Reader's Digest because it is a place to go where you will feel welcomed.

As one customer says, "It's like Cheers, somewhere where everybody knows your name."

Ideally, we would see this mindset in our daily lives too, because God knows our name and His love is unconditional, given without exceptions, to all. So the question becomes how do we make this a way of life, where we confront our own discriminations, where we strive to build bridges while at the same time not ignoring the fact that there are important differences between religions and truths?

The starting point is to remember we are all created in the image and likeness of God. When we start there, we can treat people with greater

dignity and see them not just for their function, their politics, their class, but as people God has created whom we are called to love.

Second, we need to confront discrimination. We have seen great strides in that as we celebrated Martin Luther King day this past week, but progress always continues. We need to be honest with ourselves, how do we react to our political opposite, or when we see someone who is of a different culture? What words do we use around the house to describe people, or even our Church which some can divide into liberal and conservative camps? If we tear down a person because a person is a liberal or conservative and lump people together based on politics, religion, race, etc., this behavior is learned. It's toxic. You can't control how you feel, but we can control what we do with those feelings. We can pray for God's help to change; we can make sure we aren't saying things children might pick up on that are wrong; we can strive to get to know the whole person, not just a picture, and be honest with our feelings.

Third, we can look for bridges and common ground. The Second Vatican Council Fathers wrote that for all who seek God with a sincere heart, salvation is open to them. There is much that separates us in Christianity

and from others, and also with respect to our politics and other beliefs. But, using that mindset that all are created in God's image, how would it be if we started with what we share. As Jonathan Williams, a man profiled in the story about the Falafel House said, if you want to grow as a person, you need to be around people who are a little different than you; you can't live in echo chambers." He was inspired by Yassin, and joined Andre Block, a liberal who also lived in Knoxville, on a cross country bike tour to prove that what unites us as Americans is stronger than what divides us. They went 3200 miles in 35 days from California to D.C., ending on July 4th with fireworks at the capital. What a great thing if we could just think like that in our country, our churches and community.

Fourth, we need to remind ourselves too the world does not revolve around us. Sometimes we do not get our way; but sometimes we fail to learn this as children. Parents have to use the word "no" sometimes, for sometimes we are wrong. G.K. Chesterton, the great English Catholic apologist and writer, said ***"I don't need a church to tell me I'm wrong when I know I'm wrong; I need a church to tell me I'm wrong when I think I'm right."***

The Church is there to shepherd us so hopefully we are willing to trust Her guidance in faith and morals and listen to the teachings of the faith. Maybe

we might want the Church to change teaching on something, but it's not the right thing to do. Or maybe we don't like change the Church implements. Some argue for birth control, same sex marriage, or for greater acceptance of capital punishment, but the Church is there to speak to the truth of these things, not based on popular opinion. The liturgy changes too over time. But in other matters that aren't dogmatic but the day to day issues of parish governance, or things happening in a school, or things that go on in our country, we have to accept that sometimes we will not get what we want. Sometimes people won't want to listen to the guidance of the Church and leave; other times people get so entrenched in an opinion all they do is get angry, complain, and tear down a parish or community. But how about if we strived to work together, to accept that sometimes things don't work out as we might like, to remember that we aren't a pope or bishop and that they as successors of the apostles are there to guide us, while at the same time expressing our opinions, engaging in dialogue and discussion, but ultimately learning to trust the Church in faith and morals, and let go of things when something we really want doesn't work out after a consensus has been reached.

And lastly, through it all, we must remember too we are different, but unique as a faith. Tolerance is a great thing. Cowardice is not. We can't fear talking about our faith, and as I've mentioned before part of being a Catholic means being engaged with the world, not just the people next to us in our pew. Jesus gives us a job in the Gospel: ***"come after me and I will make you fishers of men."*** And Paul says Christ sent him to preach the Gospel in our second reading. This applies to all of the baptized, and now is the time to get in the boat, but also the time to throw the nets out. Doing this means rediscovering our faith, learning it, knowing how to articulate it, how to have a real discussion, inviting people to pray or to come to Mass. As we do this we can listen to others talk about their faith and see the common ground, but we can also talk about what makes our Catholic faith unique. Yes there will be hostility at times, but there will also be souls brought to heaven when we courageously talk about our faith and strive to evangelize the world.

There is no getting around division in the world, in our country and in our Church. And in many ways, it can be a good thing. I'm passionate about my political beliefs, my faith, how I believe liturgy should be conducted, and the direction I'd like to see the Church go in. But where we can run into

problems both in our Church, country and world is when we stop working together, and see the other not as a coworker in God's vineyard, but a threat. Division can be toxic too, which is what Paul is aware of in Corinth and why he speaks so boldly against it. Then as now we can say I belong to the conservatives, the liberals, the German Catholic parish, the Latin Mass people, the contemporary music people, whatever label one chooses. But how about we work on trying to remember we all belong to God, and rather than focus on what separates, work on trying to bring one another to the heavenly kingdom? What a good thing it is when we follow our Lord. For just as a net brings all kinds of fish into the boat, so too when we cast our nets will all kinds of people be brought into the heavenly kingdom, equally loved by the Master Fisherman without exception.