(November 9, 2004) – Just one week after the national elections, discussion turned to talk itself. In a public forum sponsored by the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture at DeSales University, four representatives of discourse in various sectors of our democracy gathered to present their views on “America’s Shouting Match.”

Fr. Doug Burns, OSFS, introduced and moderated the discussion. Situating the topic in the context of the recent political campaigns, he posed the key question for the evening: “Has the ‘Jerry Springerization’ of public discourse, whether on talk-show television, on the athletic field, or in the arena of serious public debate, so altered our approach to conversations in which we disagree about important ideas that we can no longer engage in ‘reasoned discourse’?” Each panelist offered brief comments from his/her particular area of experience.

Pennsylvania Congressmen Patrick Toomey (R-15) suggested several reasons why political discourse seems so rough. First, it “reflects the general coarsening of discourse in American society,” as is evident particularly on television or radio, where folks like the trash-talking Howard Stern become stars. He also suggested that “today’s political discourse deals with much higher stakes,” where more power is up for grabs. Finally, he noted the increasing sophistication of political campaigns today, which are able to target very specific groups of voters. In his view, “negative campaigns do work” simply because a segment of potential voters respond to them.

Attorney Georgine Olexa, a partner in the law firm of Tallman, Hudders & Sorrentino who litigates medical malpractice cases, focused on the courts. There, a code of civility, enacted in the year 2000, governs legal discourse. She highlighted some examples, such as the prohibition from speaking directly to opposing counsel and the necessity of appropriate attire and using formal forms of address. She reminded the audience that the point of litigation is “dispute resolution, not the creation of a larger dispute.” One reason for the court’s emphasis on civility, she said, lies in “the change from a local to a statewide system,” in which lawyers from a county other than where they live can come in for a time and argue cases. She acknowledged that “it’s hard to be nasty to someone you play golf with, go to church with, someone whose children go to school with yours. But it is not hard to be nasty to an opponent you will never see again, and that is the biggest part of the problem.”
Dr. John Mitchell, a local psychiatrist, presented four issues that affect the changing level of communication in our society. Socially, he claims that ours “is a confusing and complicated world, much more abstract than it once was.” Culturally, since the tragedy of 9/11, a hunger for unity has become more evident, but our sense of being threatened and vulnerable has also increased, the result of which we see in our becoming a more litigious society. Politically, our country remains polarized on many issues, and with that division has come a lower level of respect for candidates. “When the president becomes a ‘regular guy,’ it’s easy for talk-show hosts and others to poke fun at him,” said the doctor. Emotionally, Dr. Mitchell noted how our feelings of being threatened cause us to regress into using various defense mechanisms in our interactions with one another. When we think in a simplistic fashion that “there is a right way and a wrong way” to everything, these strong positions “give rise to strong emotions.”

Rob Vaughn brought his 27 years of broadcast journalism to the floor to provide insights from the media’s perspective. Beginning with a common joke these days, he asked, “What is red, blue and sore all over? Our nation after the election.” In his view, though, we as a nation are not all that sore and are not in need of a “healing” that so many speak about now. He remains convinced that “America can withstand overheated rhetoric.” Besides, as he explained, extremist political discourse is nothing new; in fact, our founding fathers made even more offensive claims about their opposition than we would allow today. Then again, he confessed that some television producers do make use of “juicy” statements to increase ratings; after all, he asked, “Which of you would rather watch a calm and purely intellectual discussion about complicated policy issues?” He closed by reminding everyone of the thought of Ramesh Ponnuru, who writes for National Review: “while gratuitous offense and incivility are always to be avoided, political harmony is not an important goal in its own right.”

The audience discussion that followed raised interesting points of view. To the question whether we are supposed to enjoy the “shouting match” that television produces, Congressman Toomey pointed out his own dislike of campaigning and his preference for reasoned discussion of the issues. On whether or not arguing is simply human nature, both Attorney Olea and Dr. Mitchell agreed that it is, since it’s natural to want to win, not lose! Still, both agreed that how we interact with others should be respectful, no matter what the argument is about. And, when asked where we go from, Rob Vaughan reminded the audience, primarily composed of university students, that the key to social interaction lies in whether each one of us treats each other according to “the golden rule.”

Fr. Burns wrapped up the 90-minute session with reference to the life of St. Francis de Sales, who once exclaimed “It seems to me above all that we must be very attentive to the manner in which we propose Catholic doctrine, so that, just as reason is on our side, so also, appearances, brilliance, and beauty may not be lacking to us.” And, as this Doctor of the Church reminds us, “As we are all created alike in God’s image, we are alike created in the image of one another.”

The Center Valley Forum is a regular series of public discussions about issues of contemporary concern and controversy. For more information about future events, contact the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture at DeSales University (610.282.1100 ext. 1244).