

# In praise of tolerance

By [Andrew Hamilton](#)

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**It may seem to be rather faint praise, but we should celebrate tolerance, be grateful for it as a gift, and pray for the even greater gift of friendship.**

To celebrate an [International Day of Tolerance](#) (16 November) might seem a bit odd: like celebrating a day of mediocrity. If when asked about our relationship with a mutual acquaintance, we replied that we tolerated her, we would sound unenthusiastic. We might be expected to say at least that we got on well with her. To be tolerant seems only a short step away from actively disliking someone.

Yet sometimes toleration can be the difference between life and death. We would welcome the toleration shown by a border guard who merely detains us when he finds our papers are irregular rather than shooting us, for example. Though we might find fault with the tolerance of people who, without publicly demonstrating their prejudice or seeking to disadvantage people in minority groups, are prejudiced against them, we would still prefer that tolerant response to a prejudice that inspires discriminatory laws and casual violence. A society characterised by tolerance is better than one displaying intolerance.

## **MINIMUM REQUIREMENT**

In any society tolerance is a minimum requirement for a just and equitable social order. It needs to be ingrained in public relationships where civility and fairness can be taken for granted,

whatever people's private attitudes might be. Tolerance reflects the basic respect we pay to people because they are human like ourselves. Whatever the differences may lie between us, it affirms that we do share a common humanity. Intolerance implies that other qualities are more important than our basic humanity, and that only human beings of a particular colour, religion, political views, national identity or gender are entitled to respect.

Tolerance is an important quality that we should encourage in our society. It is also a negative quality – it spells out more clearly what we do not do and how we should not relate with other people than what we do and should do. It is not the highest of human virtues. Still, a good human quality underlies it, one to which the Latin word from which it derives points. The word means to carry or to bear. Tolerance is the ability to bear much, to have an inner strength that holds us back from spitting the dummy, going red in the face and abusing people who bring us bad news, or taking it out on the world at large when we are frustrated. It is about enduring.

### **HOW MUCH CAN WE BEAR?**

The International Day of Tolerance invites us to ask ourselves how much we are prepared to endure, and particularly how much difference we can bear, with all the uncertainties, awkwardness, fears and discomfort that we can feel in the face of difference. The day asks that question of us as persons; it asks it of the communities of which we are part; it asks, too, how we can strengthen our communities so that they can bear more difference.

That is why we should praise tolerance, be grateful for it as a gift, and pray for the even greater gift of friendship. Differences between people surely should be borne and endured. Because each human being is precious in their uniqueness and their differences are gifts, we are invited also to be curious about people in their difference and to enjoy coming to know them better.

We should be open to others and to help them to recognise the gift that they are. When that is done the International Day of Tolerance can then spread its feathers and fly as the International Day of Friendship.

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source: <https://www.pray.com.au/in-praise-of-tolerance/>