



## Can you see me smile?

KEVIN SHEERIN

There is an old Chinese proverb that says, *"A man without a smiling face must never open a shop"*.

This sounds like good advice. If you can't smile and be friendly, it's probably not worth your while opening a shop. It's the golden rule of customer service after all. We can all appreciate the value of a smile. It costs nothing to give but can enrich those who receive it. One can smile to oneself of course, but it does not have much value to another until it is given and received! Then it can be one of the most powerful means of communication we have and we do not need a college degree to master its art.

Why am I writing about smiling? Well, probably because this is the one thing I am beginning to miss most in this new COVID-19 world. It seems that the common social smile has become one of the casualties in our determination to halt the transmission of the virus. It has become collateral damage as mask-wearing has become a compulsory part of our lives. The communication that takes place so much

through our facial expressions has been considerably blocked as those vital expressions are hidden behind the masks we wear.

As missionaries one of the first challenges we encounter in arriving in a new country is the learning of the language so that we can communicate, understand the other and be understood. It can take considerable time and effort, depending on one's innate facility for languages and other personal characteristics. In the initial stages we rely a lot on the non-verbal communication that transcends all cultures - our facial expressions, the movements of our eyes, our hands, our bodies. But perhaps the most effective of all these is most likely our smiles. They make instant connections with people. As the old saying goes, a smile speaks a thousand words and if it is returned, is doubly effective.

As missionaries one of the first challenges we encounter in arriving in a new country is the learning of the language so that we can communicate, understand the other and be understood.

Here in Hong Kong, English is widely spoken but there are many who do not speak it or in certain circumstances prefer not to, particularly among the poor and homeless. As a person who smiles a lot, I found that although I could not connect to people by means of language a shared smile made all the difference. When a smile is given to you, it brings about relationship and relaxation. It makes you feel more at home rather than in a strange and foreign place. It makes you feel good and brightens your day. A frown or a scowl has the opposite effect and leaves you feeling unsure of yourself and even anxious. That is why a simple smile is so important. You never know the impact it can have on a person and how it can change a situation or a relationship.

So we are having to learn how to see the world and its people through a mask and we don't know how long it is going to be a condition of our lives in the future. When we first started to wear masks one of my colleagues jokingly asked me: "Can you see me smile?" To be honest, no, I couldn't, although I knew that beneath the mask she was smiling. We now have to rely more on the expression of the eyes, but they too can often be hidden behind dark glasses and some people have very expressive eyes and others, not so much.

A person's face, we can say, is a window to the world! Our facial expressions are so important for communication as they combine with our words in communicating our feelings, our fears, our joys, our moods, our personalities, our relationships. Without them we can become indistinguishable from one another, like robots made in the same mould.

Research confirms how vital facial expressions are in human interactions, more so than mere verbal communication. One experiment involved the communication between a mother and her baby.

This experiment proved what we all know from our own observation of babies recognising and being comforted

by their mothers' smiles and loving facial expressions. When a mother was asked to just look at the baby with an expressionless face, her baby immediately reacted and became anxious and began to cry and squirm to get away.

We know that in the business and the political world, when giving speeches and presentations, it is not only what you say that gets a message across, but how you say it. The non-verbal is so important and can make or break deals and agreements.

It is ironic that towards the end of last year when Hong Kong was rocked with daily protests and demonstrations, laws forbidding the wearing of masks came into force. Now, with the pandemic, the opposite has become the norm and everyone is required to wear a mask to prevent the spread of the disease.

We know how important wearing a mask is to protect oneself and others from the virus, but we do not want to use our masks to disguise who we are as persons, as individuals and as friends, neighbors and missionaries.

Of course, we hope and pray that soon this virus that arrived in our world so unexpectedly will eventually lose its virulence and allow us to throw our masks away and let us see people smile again. Like everyone else, I pray that we will soon see the end of lockdowns and restrictions and that we will be able to get back to work and play again in the normal way. In the meantime may we do all we can to make up for the absence of visible smiles by the way we engage and care for and relate to one another in every other way.

---

*Kevin Sheerin is a member of the Columban Lay Missionary Central Leadership Team in Hong Kong.*

We know how important wearing a mask is to protect oneself and others from the virus, but we do not want to use our masks to disguise who we are as persons, as individuals and as friends, neighbors and missionaries.