
BUILDING A "WE" THAT CARES FOR OUR COMMON HOME

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In rereading the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, I grasped Pope Francis's reason for urging connectedness with the greater „we“ on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2021. Who indeed is the subject of the greater perspective? Our planetary *oikos* needs a planetary host to care for it FT 17.

In my native language, Polish, a home needs a *gospodarz*, woman or man, to look after the well-being of all and to keep the house in good repair and garden thriving. This concept translates into English as: owner, landlord, innkeeper, householder, farmer or steward. Our common home needs all of these roles, in short, only those who identify with the greater whole are really devoted and ready to act to save our suffering common home, as well as to help those afflicted by our planet's and humankind's failing ability to sustain life.

An awareness of the greater „we“ comes with an obligation to action. At the same time, an inclusive „we“ is an opportunity to learn and grow.

Europe needs refugees and newcomers

Will we know what to do as the greater „we“? And how will we communicate with strangers, fear of misunderstanding being one of the classical barriers to encounter with someone of another language or worldview. The reading at Pentecost (Act 2, 1-11) is my inspiration: as the heavenly wind descends on the apostles, each speaks in strange languages. Amazingly, those running out to find out what the commotion is about, hear and understand: „[They] are all from Galilee, and yet we hear them speaking in our own native languages!“

Steeped in the faith that a human connection is always possible and that every human face is the external expression of an unending interiority (Claude Levinas), I have worked as a mediator in many countries whose language I did not grasp. Yet I sympathize with those who have not yet discovered that having no common language is not a barrier to interaction or a meeting of hearts.

Lack of experience with strangers and the retreat behind monoculture and monolingual contacts is a social human handicap in the Europe of national solipsisms. In Austria,

where I live, refugees and migrants are often treated as less intelligent if they do not speak German, although they may already speak 3 or more other languages!

The presence of „new“ Europeans is an opportunity for a continent stuck in post-colonial trauma, new nationalisms and cultural myopia. While the European Union was built on the vision of a new continental supra-national identity – Bronisław Geremek put it bluntly in 2004: „*Now that we have Europe, we need Europeans*“ – the reality of moving beyond narrow, national and nationalistic thinking has lagged behind. Identification with a European perspective, beyond the local and particular, is still an evolving training ground for moving to the global perspective of a common „we“.

Identity work in dialogue

I have worked since 1998 to organize intercultural and interreligious dialogue interactions in Salzburg and elsewhere, during which people of diverse identities reflect on themselves, each other and the common „we“. In the course of the three hour exchange, a public sphere of lived pluralism arises, a feeling of shared community based on differences, as well as things in common.

In the encounter between natives and newcomers, new articulations of social identity become possible: perceptions of the Other and group identity can be addressed, a cultural perspective in common worked out, to be later implemented in society at large. In this way, participants perceive not only existing identities, but also, as perspectives blend, those which in time may emerge. The engagement of migrants in such exchanges allows Europeans to reflect on who they are and are becoming. Dialogic communication makes it possible to celebrate what is one's own, while discovering the Other, instead of avoiding the Other, so as to aggressively defend what is one's own.

Sadly, we see a lack of unity in the commitment to assist refugees and migrants stranded at the gates. Fanning fear of the Other serves political expediency.

Desperate arrivals on EU territory on the island of Lesbos, in the camps of Moria and now Kara Tepe I, II and others, have become the symbol of a continent in moral agony, paralyzed into inaction. While many governments prevaricate, such as in Austria, the country where I live, hiding behind exaggerated claims of ‚doing so much already‘, eye-witness reports, for instance from the Bishop of Innsbruck, Hermann Glettler, who travelled to Lesbos in December, 2020, relate the ongoing inhumane conditions, alongside the pseudo-actions and hypocrisy of officialdom.

In the desperation of winter 2020 and frustrated by the continuing refusal of the Austrian government to share in the European resettlement of the most vulnerable on

Lesbos, celebrities in Vienna set up a symbolic tent in front of the Chancellor's office on, Dec. 22, 2020, holding a protest against government inaction and calling for children to be brought to Austria: „We stand here for humanitas“, said actor Cornelius Obonya.

Over the next weeks, numerous initiatives took up the call: WirHabenPlatz (We have room), SOS Menschenrechte, In unserer Gemeinde ist Platz – aufstehn (Our town has room, Stand up), representing 100 municipalities ready to take in children, Caritas and many other ngos, called for the immediate rescue of families and children from the camps on Lesbos. Protest camps were set up in Kufstein, Graz, Linz, Salzburg und Vienna, with activists sleeping in tents in winter to draw attention to the thousands stranded under unbearable conditions in Greek refugee camps. „*We cannot sit at home and tolerate the terrible situation of refugees at Europe's door*“. The slogan „*we have room*“ was taken up by parishes and other groups with foto campaigns showing objects of hospitality: a chair at the table, a bowl of food or a coat ready to be shared.

Claiming that moving people from the camps on Lesbos to the European mainland will create a pull factor, reinforcing the ‚market‘ for smugglers, opponents to evacuating children continue treating refugees like commodities and their movement simply an issue of protected marketplace economics. In order to change policies destructive of human beings, ordinary people strive to convert hearts FT 168.

Clothing for the Lipa refugee camp in Bosnia

My husband noticed a call in January for winter clothing. Out came three big bags which he delivered to the local Catholic student centre, only to discover animated young people in a huge room of donations, sorting and packing to join a larger transport to Bosnia.

Desperate for help, the Lipa refugee camp near Bihac is without resources. Several transports were on their way, one of them from Bavaria was accompanied by filmmaker Manuela Federl. After the shocking experiences made on her first visit while filming the delivery of donated clothing, Federl decided to refocus the film during a second visit to the catastrophic realities for those outside the camp, stranded at the border of hope to the EU between Bosnia and Croatia. The film is entitled The Game: Playing with life or death. Federl discovered women and children hiding outside the camp, making forays across the border into the E. U. and being sent back, over and over again. Equipped with food and clothing, she followed the imperative to help the desperate while filming, knowing that this help, if rendered outside the refugee camp, is illegal and will be pursued by the police. In a Salzburg newspaper I read of her heart-rending dilemma: „*What kind of world is it, if it is illegal to help?*“ Support for the film is still needed. Will its message be enough to wake people and governments to action?

As I reflect on the thousands already within the EU or just at its borders, pushed back in contravention of EU law, I am of course aware of the hundreds of thousands further away, risking fatal outcomes to cross the Mediterranean.

In the biblical story of the Good Samaritan, there are four key roles FT 72: the bandits who cause injury, the injured person lying at the roadside, the indifferent passersby and the caring one, a stranger, who stops to help. The distressing reality of the Story in today's context is that there is a fifth role: that of the ruling powers, lawmakers and politicians, making the good Samaritan's actions illegal and subject to arrests, fines, confiscation of property and public vilification.

Praying daily for deliverance from evil is not enough. Pope Francis reminds us, that *„the Lord will ask us for an account of our work!“*

It is time to act, overcoming democratically sanctioned evil with the determined and collaborative goodness of courageous citizens. Private sponsorship of refugees, a system pioneered in Canada, in which private groups provide financial and social support for persons not related to them and, at their own expense, assist their integration into the community, schooling and the workforce, is now being emulated elsewhere. If governments are not willing to act, let the people organize to do good.

