
LEARNING TO LIVE TOGETHER

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On the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2021 Pope Francis asks all men and women to reflect on how to bring about a more inclusive world, ... an ever wider „we“ renewing the human family.

The corona pandemic calls everyone to acknowledge our common safety, yet where I live in Europe, sceptics challenge science, medical authorities, and political leaders in the name of freedom and individual rights. In some sectors, less than half of those invited have accepted the invitation to receive a vaccine.

How did we become so broken, so alienated from each other that the greater „we“ has been dislocated? In our local neighborhoods, but also in the broader neighborhood of continents and global relations? And how can individuals focussed only on their own well-being, renew the ties of community with others, whom they cannot see and purportedly do not need? In biblical terms: „All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one to his own way. (Isaiah 53:6)

As a mediator dedicated to gathering persons in large groups, which may or may not be in conflict, either directly or through the affiliations which mark others as the imagined „one of them“, I have often witnessed the difficulties of going beyond one's own safe place, one's own „me“ and one's own „we“. In 25 years of mediative work, I observe that „community“ is no longer a given idea in affluent and self-satisfied European societies. In a rapidly differentiating and demographically pluralistic world, it becomes ever more difficult to assume that there are others with whom one shares similar values, unreflected and taken for granted.

As a state of balanced relations between what makes each individual different and special, on the one hand, and those things in common as a minimum that hold us together and give a sense of belonging to something larger, community is a badly compromised idea. On the one hand, by the legacy of two disastrous historical experiments in collectivism in the 20th century, which continue to loom over Europe and beyond, and on the other, by the growing extremism of individualistic orientation as consumers, shaped and driven by global neo-liberal capitalism. I shop, therefore I am.

The given experience of “we” is like the circles in water moving outward when a pebble has been thrown in: from immediate small circles of family, friends, those I trust and like, or those with whom I share language or activities, to ever expanding and moving waves of larger „we’s“, my affiliations and memberships, some chosen, many not chosen. In times of plenty and of stability, I may not even notice that I am dependent on anyone beyond my self or my family. The circle of “we” casts only small waves close to where I stand.

In crisis, otherwise autonomous and self-assured individuals huddle together under an imagined „we“, like an umbrella providing shelter. The image stems from psychiatrist Vamik Volkan, who studied bloody conflicts engulfing traumatized identity groups. In dire fear and need, the trembling „we“ focusses its energy on making sure no one else claims a space under the limited umbrella.

How is the „we“ group or groups we choose perceived by those who are „others“, the „not-we“? A question to get the reflection moving could be as follows: „Who are ‚we‘ and which ‚we‘ are we for others?

And what if the relations between these groups are further complicated by historical conflicts/atrocities; legacies of suffering, colonialism, exploitation or inborn superiority and lack of contact breeding ignorance? The Holy Father makes the point that there is no worse alienation than a lack of belonging FT 53.

Stories of avoiding the “Other” handed down the generations (the others cannot be trusted, are violent, nothing good can be expected of them) trigger emotions of fear and aversion. Given these stories, choosing to encounter the “Other” is seen to be “crazy” or dangerous. Witness the disparaging mockery of “good people” (“Gutmenschen”) in European social media, discrediting those who reached out to help the mighty wave – one million strong – of refugees marching in desperation through Europe in 2015. Two refugees from that march ended up in my home for several years, a grace.

Choosing to perceive/encounter the not-we is not a natural, but a learned experience. It requires courage to go beyond the familiar.

Pope Francis calls us to move our focus to a broader horizon: beyond the narrow “we” of comfort and complacency, past the trembling „we“ of fear and exclusion, to a greater „we“ of encounter and risk: to discover ‘others’ beyond our immediate reference groups, small or large. This greater „we“ is not a given, arising naturally in the course of life experience. It is something requiring reflection, a change of heart and the grace of transformation.

What experiences are needed to learn how to enjoin other(s), our personally imagined strangers and outcasts, to even notice them, to greet with an open heart, to want to gather with those unknown, to inter-act, i.e. to act upon and be acted upon, to find an inclusive language. To discover and name overlapping shared values and things in common, as the basis of a renewed togetherness and mutual care.

In a post-modern world, the creation of community from the ground up beyond our safe identity bubbles is a daring project needing a global vision of the human other and others. Pope Francis reminds us in the book *Dare to Dream* that the path out of the present crisis is to rediscover the sense of human belonging, of shared humanity as a People loved by the Creator. The Holy Father invokes the tradition of Scripture and of philosophers of the Other to remind us of something we have forgotten.

To learn to live together, strangers and natives, means working with identity polarities, gathering the „we's“ and not-we's“ in a safe place and time for respectful mutual exchange, discovery, listening and sharing. In these moments of mediated encounter, transformation and transcendence are often experienced as a miracle. As Archbishop of Salzburg, Marcus Sitticus, reminded us four hundred years ago: *Numen vel dissita iungit*. The Holy Spirit can unify what has been cast asunder.

As I was recently on my way to the first corona inoculation, I was moved to think that I am contributing not only to my own health, but to the health of the „herd“, the millions of people I will never meet, who depend on the immunity of the many for their safety. The greater “we“ is being born out of the crisis.

