

THE CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER

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The “other” is always someone outside of myself, beyond my personal boundaries, different from me. In the face of what is different we are confronted with three possible actions: to go towards, to embrace, to go against: resist, or to remain indifferent. Meeting the other can be motivated by various reasons: curiosity interest, need to reinforce one’s proper identity.

One of the emerging, dominant themes of Pope Francis’ pontificate is the word “encounter.” He uses it repeatedly, urging Catholics to go out to the peripheries, especially to the poor and the marginalized, and encounter other persons. “The Church is called to come out from itself and to go to the peripheries, not just the geographical but also the existential peripheries: those of the mystery of sin, of suffering, of injustice, of ignorance and lack of religion, those of thought and those of every kind of misery.”

In this encounter we should not think so much of what we have to give but also what we receive. There is no one who is so rich that he lacks nothing, just like there is no one so poor that he has nothing to offer. Those who are materially poor often have a lot that is non-financial or non-material to offer. They in turn become our evangelisers: they teach us what it means to trust in divine providence, how to be satisfied with little, how to be grateful and simple.

In fact, when we encounter those most in need and open our hearts to them, our hearts grow bigger because reaching out multiplies

our capacity to love. The Culture of Encounter is simply then, the structuring of a society in which persons encounter each other and because of this are able to encounter the living God. It underlines the notion that each person is human, unique and has a dignity which is to be respected irrespective of his or her financial or social status.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 87, Pope Francis writes: "Today, when the networks and means of human communication have made unprecedented advances, we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a 'mystique' of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage".

In today's world the possibility of encounter has risen massively, but unfortunately our human attempts to encounter seem to have diminished. As the desire to spend more time on the telephone, on the computer, in front of the Television increases the desire to spend time with our families, children, fellow sisters diminishes. We prefer to remain friends at a distance and talk constantly but when it comes to living together, we struggle.

Pope Francis notes in a recent address on the World Communications Day that "it is not enough to be passersby on the digital highways, simply 'con-nected'; connections need to grow into true encounters. We cannot live apart, closed in on ourselves...The digital world can be an environment rich in humanity; a network not of wires but of people." The possibilities for true, human encounter are

heightened by technology yet the reality is strikingly opposite—people are having fewer deep encounters than ever.

ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS CHRIST

Our faith as Christians is an encounter with Jesus and with others. Our faith is a personal encounter with Christ, which equally has a communal dimension – the Church as the Family of God. “The Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence, with their pain and their pleas, with their joys and struggles. True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others.

Our faith thus challenges us to create a “culture of encounter,” a culture of friendship, a culture in which we find brothers and sisters, who are obviously different from us, in colour, culture, language. It is an encounter in which we are equally challenged to speak with those who think differently, as well as those who hold other beliefs, who do not have the same faith or who claim not to even believe in God at all.

In spite of the differences which we quickly see we all have something in common: we are all created in image and likeness of God, we are all children of God. The Culture of Encounter proclaims the equal dignity imbued in each and every person who is the image and likeness of God. To see the world through the lens of encounter is to realize the presence of God all around us and that we are connected to each other through ties both visible and invisible. The Culture of Encounter moves us to walk the journey of our lives tenderly holding

each other's hands knowing all the while that it is Christ who is our veiled and shining companion.

Effect of Globalisation

The world is fast become a global village, vast geographical distances have been seriously shortened. Think for a while of what happens at the airport, in shopping moles, in subway stations, how many people are there together? From how many cultures, colours, races etc? But how many people do as much as greet those close to them?

When we go into the street, everyone thinks of himself: he sees, but does not look; he hears, but does not listen"; in short, everyone goes their own way. And consequently "people pass each other, but they do not encounter each other". In fact we would agree that today we have many contacts but very few authentic relationships or encounters. An encounter is not just simply meeting someone, it goes deeper. It is sharing the life of the other in one way or another.

Effects of Modern communication technology.

Pope Francis in his speech on the world day of communication on the 1st of June 2014 said: "Today we are living in a world which is growing ever "smaller" and where, as a result, it would seem to be easier for all of us to be neighbours. Developments in travel and communications technology are bringing us closer together and making us more connected, even as globalization makes us increasingly interdependent. Nonetheless, divisions, which are sometimes quite deep, continue to exist within our human family. On

the global level we see a scandalous gap between the opulence of the wealthy and the utter destitution of the poor. Often we need only walk the streets of a city to see the contrast between people living on the street and the brilliant lights of the store windows. We have become so accustomed to these things that they no longer unsettle us. Our world suffers from many forms of exclusion, marginalization and poverty, to say nothing of conflicts born of a combination of economic, political, ideological, and, sadly, even religious motives”.

We are confronted with a challenging question: How, then, can communication and modern technology be at the service of an authentic culture of encounter? What does it mean for us, as Christians, as disciples of the Lord, to encounter others in the light of the Gospel and to make our world a better place to live in?

Effect of Consumerism

A keen and genuine look at our world demonstrate that often we define and demonstrate our self-worth through the stuff we own and the position we occupy. Ours is a growing culture of excess, of consumerism. We take, own and desire far more resources than we need. We are what we consume. Even in my own reality where a human person in the traditional culture was defined by the network of relationships, (I am because we are) today important people in the society are defined by how much he or she owns and the position he or she occupies.

What is strange about consumerism is that we can never have enough. Before you finish unwrapping the new phone you thought was the latest model the upgraded version is already in the market, before

you are done with installing new programs on the brand new computer the new version of already on the market.

Despite this ardent thirst and quest for material things, there is a sense of deep emptiness. The most serious disease we are suffering and dying from is not cancer, Aids, etc but what Victor Frankl calls "the existential vacuum". Material things are not able to fill this abyss.

Based on the topic for our discussion this evening, the fundamental question thus is: how can we draw truly close to one another? This probably was what led the scribe in Luke's Gospel to ask Jesus: "And who is my neighbor?" (Lk 10:29). Jesus provides the answer with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan not only draws nearer to the man he finds half dead on the side of the road; he takes responsibility for him. He does not only meet the man but encounters him. The parable goes even deeper to indicate that it is not just about seeing the other as someone like myself, but of the ability to make myself like the other.

POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN MEETING SOMEONE FROM A DIFFERENT CULTURE

1. He or she is a human being with a human dignity that deserves respect just like myself.
2. We all have the same divine identity: created in the image and likeness of God
3. Approach the other free of prejudice
4. Avoid unnecessary questions that could indicate your feeling of superiority over the other

5. Avoid rash judgement and generalization. Even if you hear or read something about a certain culture, it's important to realise that doesn't mean everyone from that particular background acts/thinks/believes the same thing. Just as not everyone you know has identical beliefs; people who come from different cultural backgrounds aren't all a certain way either.

CONCLUSION

I have constantly affirmed that in stepping out of ourselves, we will see that other people "have something in common with us: they are images of God, they are children of God. The culture of encounter does not mean that we lose our own identity and position. I find this very important, I must know myself well and what I am capable of offering before I can attempt to know the other and to offer him or her help. Hence, self-knowledge is fundamental for the culture of encounter to be realistic and genuine.