

YEAR-END REFLECTION

The Time Has Come to Forge New Bonds

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There is a great uneasiness running throughout the world. Many countries have witnessed a multitude of demonstrations and disturbances against the governing class. Growing inequality and corruption have split society. The Neo-liberalism to which many of these demonstrations are responding has become an ideology that many of the participants can no longer abide. For some people it is because they suffer its consequences in their own lives; for others it subtly reduces them to individual consumers with no value other than that of being interchangeable numbers rather than persons. In addition, this ideology marginalizes ever larger sectors of society who then become disposable. Pope Francis has referred to this unsupportive type of culture as a “culture of rejection”.

In the wake of the eruption of the great technological transformation of the 20th century, we are leaving behind what we could call a *paradigm of interconnective*

bonds and replacing it with a *paradigm of individual salvation*, of development of self, without anyone feeling responsibility for the development of others. The capitalist economy has deepened even more this process of breaking the bonds between individuals which has been seen gaining strength through the globalization movement of today.

The framework that we propose chooses hope; it is a framework that discerns change and makes the decisions necessary for the full development of persons. Since 1990 the United Nations has been talking about a kind of human development which is inclusive and sustainable and which now has been concretized in the Sustainable Development Goals. Integral human development should allow people with different backgrounds to live together and accept a *common ethical grammar*; but one that is *declined* in the plural. Such a framework is possible and desirable, and it calls us to

take responsibility in committing ourselves to it.

In our year-end reflection we would like to draw attention first to the processes that go in the opposite direction:

- There exists a breaking of affective bonds, an invasion by possessive individualism that is spreading into all areas of life. This results in the breaking apart of collective projects and a complete disinterest in what affects everyone other than oneself. We are taking part in an “era of confrontation” (Ch. Salmon), where pursue confrontation in order to achieve their own goals, relying on violent gestures, on false versions of the truth, on what is called “hate speech” and even on the manipulation of information and opinion.
- There is clearly an inability to arrive at agreements among political forces, and it is coupled with a readiness to break those agreements unilaterally. The four legislative elections held in Spain in barely four years, the trade wars initiated by Trump and his abandonment of the fight against climate change are only some of the many examples. A short-range view makes impossible the sacrifices necessary to attack any long-range projects.
- We are witnessing an unceasing hoarding of resources and, too often, an obscene squandering of them by those who are more powerful. Although the statistics concerning hunger and life expectancy have improved (in relative terms) in the course of time, their current stagnation and the gap of inequality cry out to heaven. Globalization has converted the poor of the world into competitors and therefore has led them to see each other as enemies.

This lack of bonds continues to cause wounds

Some simple but very expressive statistics allow us to begin our considerations with concrete examples.

- Loneliness is already an illness which is endemic in large cities. For example, in the city of Barcelona, the number of persons obliged to sleep in the streets has grown by 72% in ten years, from 1429 people (2008) to 2452(2018).
- Sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults, by power or persuasion, creates a deep and lasting wound. In Spain 45,000 people are banned from working with minors because of their criminal history of a sexual nature.
- There is also a growth in the “externalization of caregiving”: parents have no time for their children, elderly people have no one to help them, etc. Even in cases where care is not farmed out to others, we find the feminization of caregiving and the resultant overburdening of many women.
- Violence against women persists into 2019. By the end of November there were 99 murders of women in Spain, 55 of whom were victims of *machista* violence, and there were more than 80,000 complaints recorded about this type of violence.

Our world is no longer only “liquid”, as others have said, but many times it is also “gaseous”. Faced with the volatility of things that were thought to be certain and the fluidity of identities, self-protective movements have appeared that herd people together into the tribes with which they identify. The egoism of the “I” in our world has become a “we” that excludes

others: “Us first And us afterwards as well!”

In this process it is the extreme right that has attempted to gain the advantage, sequestering religion for its own ends. It makes use of religion in order to spread a dualistic way of thinking, both Manichae-an and integralist. The return to what is secure—often identified with “the sacred” but also with the recent past, either real or idealized—is accomplished by employing religion in a way that is dishonest.

We cannot be neutral in the face of anti-immigrant rhetoric, the failure to recognize diverse identities, the use of “hate speech”, the deterioration of civil rights, or the anthropological loss of cultural and linguistic biodiversity. Populist and xenophobic movements appeal to the most basic emotions in their most rudimentary form. We should reject their proposal that we sacrifice democracy on the altar of apparent security, behind which lies a short-term benefit for a few, well-situated people.

More than half of the democracies of Europe have been eroded. Six nations—three members of the European Union (Hungary, Poland, Romania) and three others (Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine)—are among the ten countries where democracy has most deteriorated during the last few years. In Spain, the use of the judicial system to resolve a regional political conflict, the protests in Catalonia following the court’s judgment, and the growth of the extreme right in the last elections are evidence that democracy is in peril when politicians are not capable of tackling sociopolitical tensions. This situation is always to the detriment of civil rights and makes impossible a resolution that would be an expression of justice and fraternal unity. All of this should put us on the alert not to take democracy for granted.

One single struggle against inequality and on behalf of the climate emergency

The contradiction between a maddening and unjust neoliberal capitalism that requires constant economic growth and the crisis brought on by climate change is really one, single crisis. Both parts need a simultaneous solution. For a long time, a concern for ecology and the struggle for the rights of workers were seen as incompatible. It was as if one thing supposed the prioritization of animals—often exotic—and the other the primacy of human life. Today it is clear that the causes and consequences of both problems are interrelated. While all of us are affected by air pollution, it is the poor who suffer the most from climate change. Sadly, after the last climate summit (COP25, held in Spain) we saw the inability of nations to arrive at agreements which tackle this emergency with the necessary force and radicality.

It is true that a solution does not depend only on a moral conversion. But if there are no areas where cultural and moral presuppositions requiring a reversal of attitude can be cultivated, then the necessary sources of meaning that would make economic and ecological change viable will be found only with great difficulty. The intervention of religious, philosophical, civic and humanistic traditions can be decisive.

Recreating bonds and interrelationships

Faced with this danger of becoming disconnected from others—a deadly factor for our society—we propose (because we must) cultivating the relationships that build us up collectively. In order to do that, we need a concept of a human nature that

recognizes that the “other” person forms a part of me. Building fraternal unity means that we cannot consider anything human as being foreign to us.

Our Christian conviction roots us in a style of life that has its original model in the Holy Trinity, a community of relationship, an infinite communion of Love. In turn, this relationship is palely reflected in our caring for nature as our common home, in a Church that is called to be a “school of community”, and in a human society called together to build a spirit of unity as a community of reciprocal relationships and mutual care and responsibility. Confronted with a society of broken bonds, we advocate for a society which makes us responsible partners in a common life.

In the conference at the beginning of the course at *Cristianisme i Justícia*, the Belgian theologian Jacques Haers reminded us that before being individuals we are part of a relationship. There is a *we* before there is an *I*. Relationship is the first and fundamental category of being. To walk paths in common, to plan out our work together, to be convinced that by living and making decisions together “everyone wins” (though we all lose something as well), to see the heartbeat of the world reflected in the eyes of others, to receive otherness as a gift and to hand it on as a task—all these are ways to exercise the hope to which we are all called.

Going to look for water at the same fountain ...

Despite all the problems, there is a place for hope if we look at the stars of solidarity that shine in this dark night.

There are many reasons to hope: families who voluntarily take migrants and refugees into their homes, the coming together of social initiatives in Europe, young people who struggle against climate change, and the synod of the world’s forgotten peoples in which indigenous folk speak out and are loudly applauded by the audience. These are some of the signs of hope that fill the *anima mundi*. The fraternal unity proposed here allows us to combine co-responsibility, the sharing of a common destiny, and the promotion of greater autonomy for each person and group of whatever type we choose. All this combines with justice as a starting point that brings about real equality and a recognition of differences in such a way that the final distances are never unbreachable but are always compatible with unity.

Solidarity—another name for unity—promotes development for the common good. The civil powers have an inescapable role in making it possible for all of us to be truly responsible for everyone else.

To be together, pray together, celebrate together, sing and dance together, to have goals that unify us above and beyond all of our differences, to be open to spending idle time with others, to enter into the public arena so that those of us who are different can look for water at the same fountain—these are all ways of being that makes us more truly a person.

The more we take on great difficulties, the more those difficulties will diminish. This is our challenge, a challenge that rises out of our hope.

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