

Four Basic Principles Proposed by Our Brother Francis for Building a Community Where Peace Can Flourish

In the wonderful Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* of Pope Francis, which followed the Synod on the New Evangelization, Chapter four is devoted to the social dimension of evangelization.¹ Our father and brother Francis warns us at the very beginning of this significant development, that he does not intend to offer us a synthesis of the Church's entire social doctrine, but that he does want to help us reflect on two points: the inclusion of the poor in society,² and peace and social dialogue.³

But can we really achieve this peace if we do not commit all our energies into building the human communities to which we belong: families, communities of consecrated life, civil society, Church? To succeed in this construction, Pope Francis invites us to apply four basic principles:

Time is greater than space.⁴
Unity prevails over conflict.⁵
Realities are more important than ideas.⁶
The whole is greater than the part.⁷

A first reading of these statements might leave us somewhat puzzled, even surprised. But whoever takes the trouble to delve more deeply into these principles could find them to be of great help in attaining a community life bearer of peace.

1. To make progress in building a people, always remember, says Francis, that **time is greater than space**.

After a moment of surprise, I read and reread Numbers 222 through 225 several times. They deal with the tension between fullness and limitation, between time and the individual moment. Broadly speaking, time "has to do with fullness" while each individual moment "has to do with limitation." Our life occurs, "poised between each individual moment and the greater, brighter horizon of the utopian future as the final cause which draws us to itself."

If you give priority to time over space, Francis tells us, that enables you "to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results," it helps you "patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans." Basically, our Brother Francis is comparing "spaces and power" and "time and processes."

Giving priority to space, from this perspective, "means madly attempting to keep everything together in the present, trying to possess all the spaces of power and of self-assertion." Giving priority to time "means being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces." Francis asks the question: "I wonder if there are people in today's world who are really concerned about generating processes of people-building?" Evangelism is a work of patience. In light of John 16:12 and Mt 13:24-30, are we not asked to "pay attention to the bigger picture," to have "concern for the long run."

2. The great principle: "**Unity prevails over conflict**" is also a founding principle for building a community.

How can one look at a conflict? Francis mentions three possible answers: People can simply look at the conflict and go their way as if nothing happened. People can embrace the conflict in such a way that they become its prisoners, "lose their bearings" and then "unity is impossible." The third solution, the one advocated by Francis, is to have "the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process." Adopting the third way towards the conflict will enable us "to build communion amid disagreement." Are we able to see others in their deepest dignity? By developing

¹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 176–258.

² *Ibid.*, 186–216.

³ *Ibid.*, 217–258

⁴ *Ibid.*, 222–225.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 226–230

⁶ *Ibid.*, 231–233.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 234–237.

solidarity in its deepest and most challenging sense with our brothers and sisters, we become aware that this solidarity is "a way of making history," that it points us toward "a diversified and life-giving unity."

Francis says that the sign of this unity and reconciliation of all things in Christ is peace and he refers to Eph 2:14 and Col 1:20. For Francis, the first area of this reconciliation of differences is "within ourselves, our own lives, ever threatened as they are by fragmentation and breakdown." Remember, says Francis, "Christ has made all things one in himself," that "unity brought by the Spirit can harmonize every diversity." You must work ceaselessly to bring forth a "reconciled diversity."

3. A third principle must be implemented if we are to build the community: Never forget that **"realities are more important than ideas."**

Francis advises us that "there has to be continuous dialogue between the two" (reality and ideas). We should reject the "various means of masking reality." I like the image used by Francis: cosmetics can't take the place of real care for our bodies; don't reduce policy or faith to rhetoric. And if we look in the Gospel for a basis for this priority given to reality over ideas, don't we come back to the Incarnation? A "word already made flesh and constantly striving to take flesh anew," that is what is "essential to evangelization."

Giving priority to reality, Francis says, "helps us to see that the Church's history is a history of salvation;" "to be mindful of those saints who inculcated the Gospel in the lives of our peoples;" "to reap the fruits of the Church's rich bi-millennial tradition;" "put the word into practice;" "perform works of justice and charity." Whoever does not make the word reality builds on sand, remains "in the realm of pure ideas and ends up in a lifeless and unfruitful self-centredness and gnosticism."

4. Anyone who wants to build a community must honour a fourth principle, namely that **"the whole is greater than the part."**

You have to "pay attention to the global" dimension, but at the same time, "we need to look to the local, which keeps our feet on the ground." Two extremes are to be avoided: 1) people "get caught up in an abstract, globalized universe," and 2) "they turn into a museum of local folklore, a world apart, doomed to doing the same things over and over, and incapable of being challenged by novelty or appreciating the beauty which God bestows beyond their borders."

"There is no need, then, to be overly obsessed with limited and particular questions." We constantly have to broaden our horizons, but must do so "without evasion or uprooting." We can work "on a small scale, in our own neighbourhood, but with a larger perspective." People who are well-rooted and comfortable with their identity "who wholeheartedly enter into the life of a community" do not need to lose their individualism or hide their identity; on the contrary, says Pope Francis, "they receive new impulses to personal growth."

In Christian terms, this fourth principle evokes "the totality or integrity of the Gospel." There is room in it for academics as well as for workers, for heads of corporations as well as for artists; it is open to one and all. Francis reiterates, once again, that the "genius of each people receives in its own way the entire Gospel and embodies it in expressions of prayer, fraternity, justice, struggle and celebration." Inherent in the Gospel is this criterion of totality: The Gospel must be proclaimed to all people, "until it has healed and strengthened every aspect of humanity, until it has brought all men and women together at table in God's Kingdom."

Some Questions for Us:

1. How do my choices, my decisions express that I give priority to time? Or that I prioritize space?
2. How do we deal with conflicts in the community to which I belong?
3. Are our community discernments rooted in our experiences or in our theories?
4. In the Institute to which I belong, how do we encourage the development of a broader perspective in work on a small scale, in our own neighbourhood?