

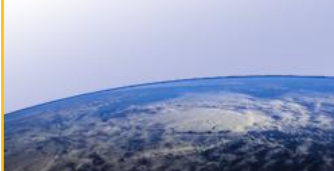
We cannot think of ourselves as mutually exclusive

The other is essential to me

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The author, a philosopher and lecturer at the Sophia University Institute, invites us to consider a different way of looking at the 'otherness' between persons and groups which sometimes leads to conflict and mutual exclusion.

When we consider the other as essential to us and recognize our diversity in each other, differences become a source of enrichment and can lead to that spark of unity in diversity which is a source of creativity and constant newness.



How do we think?

In our everyday experience we are constantly faced with the reality of conflict in our personal lives and in our workplaces. More generally, we witness it in society and in the Church, in the groups or movements we belong to, all the way up to the global level.

Usually, when we look at a conflict, we think we see something that is, in some way, beyond us, something that is *in front of* us, outside of us and our thinking. Our thinking, after all, seems to have nothing to do with it: if it is *in front of* us, so we argue, it is not *in* us.

From where, then, does the conflict that we see externally originate?

Being configured and manifested first of all as interpersonal antagonism, we must admit that what presents itself outside of us is also the fruit of a seed that actually lies within us personally. Our thinking, therefore, is not unconnected to the conflict. Perhaps the origin of the question (*How do we think?*) lies precisely in the way it relates to difference.

Identity and Difference

In effect, if we start from a basic anthropological datum, we are accustomed to understanding our personal identity and, therefore, the unity we have with ourselves, as excluding what is other, what is different from us, since - with good reason - we can say: "I am not the other", "what I am is not the other". What we are less aware of, however, is that this unity with ourselves, our identity, cannot be achieved without an encounter with another. Looks, gestures, hugs, the words that we exchange are not indifferent, they penetrate us, they nourish what we say about ourselves and, therefore, also what we think of ourselves and how we consider our identity. It follows, then, that we cannot achieve unity with ourselves by abstracting from what links us with the diversity of the other.

For this reason, when the other person wrongs me, and maybe even hurts me, I am stand before a crossroads: what do I think about this wound? Do I consider it external to me and try to ignore it? Or, because it has touched me, do I welcome it and recognize it as a part of me to be accepted? If I ignore it, I am not taking into account what is now a part of me. If I ignore it, in other words, I do not accept myself, because I am also the one who is wounded.

Also in this sense, then, the identity that wants to assert itself without recognizing otherness is destined to discover itself as empty, to sink into nothingness. That is because if I do not recognize difference as constitutive of me, then when I look within myself I will only find an enormous void. Instead, every time we look within ourselves we find the presence of so many others: our parents, our friends, our companions, etc. Identity, therefore, presupposes difference: unity is unity in the authentic sense only if there is also diversity. Therefore, difference and the other are the conditions for the possibility of unity, no longer being able to say "we are in unity even if we are different", but rather "we are in unity because we are different, thanks to the fact that we are different". If we were all the same, identical, then we would have nothing to share and exchange, as well as no reason to meet. On closer inspection, we could not relate to each other in any way, because we would be the same: this would be hell!

From conflict ...

Proceeding from what has been said, the conflict between me and the other, on closer inspection, arises as soon as I do not pay attention to this dynamic where the other is essential to me. And, precisely, either I or the other think of ourselves as mutually exclusive, we believe ourselves to be "one", in unity first of all with ourselves, without the others. If this is true, *identity and unity*, whether they be personal or those of a group, *are not such regardless of the other*. Therefore, when we place ourselves in an exclusionary, conflictual way, not only do we try to deny the difference of the other, because in some way somehow we find it difficult to accept it, but more profoundly, since I am not even me if I do not carry the other in me, we are unconsciously trying to deny ourselves as well.

Therefore, when I choose conflict, I am denying not only the other but also myself. Those who do the opposite, who do not adopt a position of conflict, are not only behaving well morally but are acting reasonably because they are overcoming their own limits, their distinctiveness, and offering it to the other as a possibility of enrichment of their own identity and that of the other. Thus, differences are not only to be not excluded and denied but to even be promoted because without them there would be no true unity.

... to "cum-fligere".

Within this mutually enriching dynamic, which in turn - insofar as it is constituted in a group - must remain reciprocal (that is, it must always be effusive, open to others), it is then possible to see another way of understanding and living conflict. What we have written so far is conflict understood in its most widespread sense, that is, the one we find in the dictionary, which associates conflict with mutual exclusion. However, we can also give a further meaning to the term by recalling its etymology. Conflict comes, in fact, from the Latin *cum-fligere*, and literally means "to strike together" or "to beat something together". Interpreted in this way then, conflict does not imply mutual exclusion but the convergence of differences that instead implies - we could say - the rubbing together of differences, as

if they were two stones from which a spark can be ignited – as Plato said in *Letter VII - the spark of the unity of the diverse*.

This dynamic thrives on frank confrontation and mutual *parrhesia* and is even better the more the relationship is marked by authentic fraternity and togetherness. This is a way which makes it possible to lighten relational reluctance and difficulties, because in *cum-fligere* it becomes possible to live the dynamic of the free and full offering of oneself, inviting a mutual sharing with the other that is to be renewed and regained because it is that not-taken-for granted reciprocity in which we can call ourselves one, but *by being more than one*.

In a beautiful and bold expression, Pope Francis went so far as to say it is necessary to "caress the conflict." To caress means not only that we must not be frightened or discouraged by conflict, but rather that we must take care of it, to live it in the sense of *cum-fligere*. Caressing, in other words, is an invitation to take care of the meeting of differences, so that unity may be patiently cultivated and sought in diversity, not beyond it.

In relational dynamics, therefore, *cum-fligere* should be blessed and sought after, in the sense that it leads to unity. Without *cum-fligere*, unity with the other, on closer inspection, does not exist, it is an illusion: either it will become indifference (that is, there is an absence of a real encounter), or it is confused with the destruction of one in the other (often disguised by obedience). *Cum-fligere* must therefore be welcomed and, more, loved, desired as the leaven that permeates the dough of interpersonal encounter.