

Urgency and the true meaning of dialogue

Conflict as the cure?

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Why are international relations in crisis? New paths are needed, and everyone must embark upon this journey. Below is an excerpt from a talk given at the 2024 Together for Humanity Conference in Castelgandolfo, Italy¹. Vincenzo Buonomo is Professor of International Law and International Organization at the Pontifical Lateran University, and a professor of European Union Law. He participates as an expert to the Holy See's Delegations to the UN, FAO and the Council of Europe.

To reflect upon peace with a focus on international relations requires that we do not run from difficulties and uncertainties. If we look at what is happening in the world, we note that peace is markedly absent, at least in terms of the authentic meaning of peace. This authentic peace differs from the rhetoric of peace, or desiring situations that could then allow us to feel protected. Peace is a condition that must be present in individual lives and among peoples, so each one can fulfill his or her own existence, aspirations, relationships with others, a sense of believing, of loving, of creativity... And all this without the fear that the will of others (people or groups) might decide otherwise or impose that which is the opposite of peace.

Instead, we are increasingly assuming as our own understanding of what we mean by peace does not coincide with actual peace. This is the first reflection required of those who deal with international issues and who want to speak about peace.

Malfunctioning of international relations

The current, familiar scenario in international relations lacks a peace dimension. Indeed, we all wonder where peace is in the face of conflict and polarization. But I believe one aspect needs particular emphasis. It is insufficient to list the many conflicts taking place, nor can we simply see war as having become an almost inevitable instrument. Unfortunately, we need to point out that we are making war the cure for every situation on the planet that poses difficulties, that pits ideas, viewpoints and interests against each other. This trend – which seems to have become a path of action at every level – is now widespread in international relations.

When there are economic problems pitting two or more nations against one another, how are they dealt with? Or what plans are implemented to solve them? The path becomes

one of conflict through market closures, blockading the movement of workers or goods, and imposing economic constraints on the transport of raw materials and products. Similarly, how are health problems (like the pandemic) now dealt with? Conflict is created between those who are able to carry out research, technology, and treatment (think of vaccine availability) and those who do not.

It appears that the cure for our world's dark situations today is linked to a country - or group of countries - exerting its power, which then translates into the use of force. In addition, this force is not only military but also economic, political, and cultural. The most credible analyses argue that it is a period, probably a cycle of history. But we are called to read and interpret it, because it is what we are experiencing as a part of this moment in history. We are not part of a hoped-for dream or an ancient past. Rather we are inserted into a reality in which conflict is being proposed as a cure.

And this, I believe, should make us stop and reflect when we approach peace issues. This is not a matter that depends on others and for which we are exempt from responsibility or from giving our contribution. Peace is made by people, by their relationships and their convictions.

A crisis of multilateralism

In looking at conflicts, we see that they are increasingly "asymmetrical". Conflicts no longer correspond to traditional patterns, where two or more parties confront one another. We can also think of war in situations where there is a State on one side, and armed fighting factions or terrorist groups on the other. Instead, other situations involve war between States and minority groups present within those same nations. There are also conflicts in which confrontation escalates between a superpower and a small country, with other nations coalescing behind the small country. Increasingly, wars do not correspond to what we thought they were. And this is another element characteristic of our world today.

In looking at international events, we see that major international and regional bodies like the UN, the African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Countries, the European Union and the Organization of American States lack necessary effectiveness in the face of conflicts and wars. In fact, despite the actions of these institutions, crises and conflicts are no longer managed within such structures but instead determined apart from them, in a dimension limited to circumscribed interests, or privileged meetings between certain States or between groups of States.

We hear talk of a *multilateral crisis*. But what does this mean? The UN, for example, could also work relative to these ongoing conflicts, but the will of its member States prevents it. And these same member States, our States, then pointedly decide to take the crises out of such international bodies. However, this does not happen without authorization by

someone. It is a choice, and behind this choice there is a new way of understanding international relations.

Then, another observation: Multilateralism exists and works. But the principal actors who animate it and the protagonists have changed. Multilateralism today no longer sees the presence of nations alone, but also economic and financial interests and institutions. Large research and production structures now manage technology, with collective opinions now inspired by diverse cultures and currents of thought that position themselves internationally and demand full consideration. Through the widespread presence of stakeholders, one sees a different face of multilateralism. It is one no longer expressed by the States themselves. A structural dimension is operating that understands multilateral relations in a diverse manner. It is one composed of power blocks that are different from traditional ones.

Training and dialogue

We need to imagine new scenarios, because with healthy realism we must not only think that moving forward is possible, but that moving forward is a given. This moving forward - and we can also speak of our own lives and those of others or the whole human family - cannot stop, it is continuously marching ahead. And this asks us to be in some way present and able to participate in that which is new, in that which is moving forward. There is a novelty present every day; it is there at every moment.

To be a part of this, *training* is necessary. When we are asked for our opinions, we must be trained and ready to serve an important function, to be capable of also generating a multiplier effect. That is, our opinion must circulate and must be able to be circulated. It is necessary for us to adopt an approach of international cooperation - of true cooperation that produces a multiplier effect -- because otherwise it stops at being a single event.

Training must be accompanied by *dialogue*. There is much talk about dialogue, but sometimes without grasping its true function. Dialogue cannot be just a means or tool. It must be a methodology allowing us to keep moving ahead in the face of obstacles and conflicts. In dialogue, what is fundamental is the ability to lose something individually in order to acquire something better, but together. If dialogue starts from here, the parties in dialogue cannot know what achievements will be possible. But they have an awareness of each needing to lose something: their being and conviction about some things. And above all, each party involved must know that they are talking to another who has a different vision.

The tragedy of international negotiations today is that it is in crisis. Today peace negotiations are blocked because dialogue does not consider the ability to "lose something", but rather only that of acquiring, of being able to have other things.

Therefore, revisiting the concept of dialogue is important precisely to ensure that negotiations will have positive outcomes. Negotiations, which are the only way forward at the international level, are now empty and reduced to formal meetings. It is sitting around a table and expressing one's position, and often these positions are already well-known. Thus, sitting around a table without the will to reach a solution is useless. Such conviction is lacking at this moment at the international level.

If we look closely, the crisis of international organizations is also a crisis of negotiations. Why? Because an essential element is missing: Proposals that can bring solutions. This is often true in international meetings that fail to provide valid ideas around which to channel the will of States that prefer to take actions involving bilateral solutions or commitments between small groups.

These are ideas that can guide us in the search for the meaning of peace. We need to start by recovering the meaning of peace, which is not only the absence of war. It is the needed conditions by which each person can realize a relationship with others, find space for their own aspirations and life expectations, and look towards a sustainable future. It is a journey in which every person can do so much!

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