

A closer look at the *'Paths of Light'* initiative

Re-actualizing reciprocity

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This article focuses on the principle of reciprocity permeating the Paths of Light project. The author, who is also a priest, is originally from Argentina and has extensive international experience working as a psychiatrist and psychologist.

Viktor Frankl, founder of logotherapy, emphasized the importance of critically clarifying the anthropology implicit in psychotherapy¹. Similarly, the late theologian Klaus Hemmerle, highlighted the need to recover Christian anthropology in order to provide a solid theoretical basis for pastoral and ecclesial efforts: "The recovery of this anthropology is also a priority from a pastoral perspective [...] and is a theoretical foundation without which, in my experience, practical mediation often ends in irresolvable conflict"².

Thus, we will attempt here to deepen our understanding of the principle of reciprocity underlying the *Paths of Light* project from this same, anthropological perspective.

What does "reciprocity" mean?

Reciprocity, according to the English dictionary, is "everything that happens between two people, two things, two groups in such a way that an action or thing received by one of the two corresponds to an equivalent action or thing by the other." The concept is applied in economics, mathematics, international politics and psychology. Studying reciprocity offers significant advantages as it is central to all human relationships: the male-female relationship, team synergy and collaboration among professionals.

In this context, I would like to highlight two particularly relevant reflections on reciprocity.

Pope Francis illustrated reciprocity using a familiar image: the sharing of the 'mother dough' of bread before the era of refrigeration. Reciprocity, according to the Pope, is a communion that is not only a sharing but a multiplying of these goods.³

For Martin Buber, a prominent initiator of dialogical philosophy, reciprocity is a central concept. In his essay *I and Thou*, he states: "I become I in you; becoming me, you. Every real life is an encounter"⁴. For Buber, relationship and reciprocity are identical: "Relation is reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it. Our students teach us, our works form us. The wicked one reveals himself when he is touched by the holy word. How we are educated by children, by animals! Inscrutably involved, we live in the currents of universal reciprocity".

Thus, to truly live is to encounter.

Dynamic Integration of Psychology, Spirituality, and Witness

The *Paths of Light* project has made reciprocity the foundation of its methodology, intertwining three dimensions as in a dance, in which each refers to the other: psychology, spirituality and the witness of those couples involved. The novelty of *Paths of Light* lies precisely in the implementation of these three dimensions reciprocally, thanks to a differentiated and specialized team that values synergy more than individual roles and where everyone learns from one another.

To make ourselves understood, let us consider the work with couples in crisis, where the focus is often upon only one of these areas – the spiritual, psychological or testimonial – with perhaps a smattering of the other two. In self-help groups, for example, the testimonial (witness) dimension predominates, without in any way suppressing what comes from psychology or spirituality. Various couples' therapies are based on various psychological schools of thought, without denying the spirituality of the people. And a therapist can, at some point, share elements of his or her own life or that of other people. Pastoral care and spiritual accompaniment in the Church emphasize the religious dimension of people, even if some pastoral leaders have psychological backgrounds and may also serve as a witness or model for others.

Everyone learns from everyone

Instead, the principle of reciprocity requires that each one learns from all the others. We can say that this is the experience of the "dance" between psychology, testimony and spirituality that takes place in the *Paths of Light* program. The psychologists involved have seen that one can understand "a patient" by gathering information, but one must have an existential, human and loving approach in order to fully understand another. Those who give testimony and bear witness develop resilience from spirituality and psychology. Instead, those experienced in areas of spiritual life learn that the soul does not exist without the body. The vision of these experts, which at times may seem too abstract, is called back to reality. Yet it also brings confirmation of how much the spiritual life can have a powerful impact on the concrete as well.

Thus, this reciprocal openness and acceptance is lived out as 'gift'. The one who is an expert in psychology contributes through study, research and empirical verification in support of the whole project, paving the way for a transmission to academic and governmental spheres. The one who offers testimony and bears witness, instead, offers nothing less than his or her own life, letting go of understandable resistance in thinking themselves special and unique in relation to others from a psychological perspective. And, finally, those caring for the spiritual aspects offer their gifts even in moments when implementing decisions is tough and thoughts are confused. A person's call to freely assume greater responsibility can only come from this dimension, from the guidance that comes from divine grace.

Beyond transactional ways of loving

The answer, well defined by Italian philosopher Roberto Mancini, consists in "respectfully and gently accompanying a person to overcome transactional ways of loving in order to mature into the freedom of gratuitous love. It is a difficult path full of setbacks and possible regressions, as well as disorientation and confusion. Yet it is a humanizing path that gives the fullness of freedom to those who embark upon it."⁵

Mancini draws attention to the relationship between care as a methodology and reciprocity as a horizon that awaits us. In caring, reciprocity is found at each moment of the relationship journey between those who help and those who are helped, with growth dependent upon this. But in a relationship, reciprocity is also the horizon that awaits, which is a criterion of human maturity.

Reciprocity acts as a driving force. It is realized not only through an open exchange in every aspect of the project's activities, but reciprocity opens a relationship onto the future. This is essential for *Paths of Light*: couples in crisis situations are welcomed with the intention of revitalizing their bond and envisioning a future of deeper growth and maturity.

In conclusion, *Paths of Light* finds in reciprocity a fundamental methodological principle permeating every relationship. This contributes to the building of solid, meaningful bonds between those project team members, between spouses and between the accompanying couples.

¹ Cf. V.E. Frankl, *Meaning and values for existence. The Response of Speech Therapy*, Città Nuova, Rome 1998.

² K. Hemmerle, *Marriage and Family in a Trinitarian Anthropology*, in «Nuova Umanità» 6 (1984/1) n. 31, p. 5.

³ Cf. Francis, Address to the participants in the meeting "Economy of Communion", promoted by the Focolare Movement, February 4, 2017.

⁴ M. Buber, *You and I*, in *The Dialogical Principle and Other Essays*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 1993, pp. 66-67.

⁵ R. Mancini, *The sense of care. A reflection on the existential relevance of love and salvation*, in P. Bartolini - R. Mancini, *The love that saves. The Meaning of Care as a Philosophical Vocation*, Ugo Mursia Ed., Milan 2019, p. 31.