

Accompanying

It has become all the more apparent in our times that there is a great need for good accompaniment. In the past, this was almost a given. In the village or small town, there would be the parish priest, the teacher and the doctor and it is also true to say that life was lived within the context of large families spanning multiple generations, where there was ample opportunity for listening, advice, correction, support and help. To paraphrase an African proverb which teaches that it takes a village to raise a child, we might say: *it takes a village to accompany a person*. Certainly, while such a social and family context imposed limits on individual freedom, it undoubtedly also offered many advantages. The truth is that every person needs to "have a home," and today, unfortunately, many do not.

Perhaps this is what we should primarily reflect on when we talk about accompaniment and 'integral' accompaniment. Creating a social fabric where this can take place is a great and indispensable task. Against this background, specific forms and means of accompaniment are also relevant – especially so today.

Traditionally, in Christian experience, this accompaniment was provided by the spiritual father or director, a trusted person with whom one could open up without reservations, confident of being listened to and receiving expert advice. Nowadays, we prefer to characterize it rather as a spiritual accompanier because the "father" and the "teacher," as Jesus told us, are one. And we are also aware, as Pope Francis has repeatedly emphasized, that it does not necessarily have to be male or a priest but could also be a consecrated woman, a layman, or a laywoman, as long as they possess the necessary spiritual stature and the charism of accompaniment.

However, it is increasingly evident – and entirely in line with the Christian faith that centers on God made man – that spiritual accompaniment alone is not enough; we need an integral or holistic accompaniment which is psycho-physical-social as well as spiritual. This involves a multiplicity of skills and components that must operate in a convergent manner and not in isolation, where they complement one another and benefit the person involved. This is anything but easy and nothing can be taken for granted.

We are slowly becoming aware that an *educating community*, not just a set of individuals, must form people. We realize that only a team of people of various vocations and different skills, who complement and learn from each other, ensures that accompaniment can take place in the successive stages of life, particularly in moments of crisis or trial. Ultimately, a fabric that reflects the entirety of the people of God. Because it indeed takes a village; it takes the people to form and accompany every vocation. Only then can specific accompaniment work well and bear fruit. It cannot happen as in a laboratory, outside the rich soil of the ecclesial, family and civil community.

It is essential, then, that every accompanier must tiptoe through the process, in an attitude of deep listening and service that continuously refers to the other and the whole, in the awareness of thus referring to the Other with a capital *O*: the only Master and the only Father! This is, after all, the great art of every relationship where accompaniment takes place: to do one's part entirely, but with total transparency, so that in everything and among all, the Supreme Accompanier is highlighted. This process should reach the stage where those accompanying become almost superfluous so as to avoid the need for indefinite support that would simply create immaturity.

It a gradual journey, which we can see in Jesus as he accompanied the disciples on the road to Emmaus and in many other episodes of the Gospel. He starts from where people are and accompanies them in the next step, without demanding everything at once so that the light breaks through and the calling matures. Then, yes, there is the 'all at once': "They set out at once," says Luke of the disciples of Emmaus (24:33) and in Mark's account of the calling of the first disciples: "And immediately they left their nets and followed him" (1:18).

These are the points of reference which the various contributions of this issue of *Ekklesia* journey towards.

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