



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

*10th September 2023
14th Sunday after Trinity*

Reflection

What church wouldn't aspire to be renowned as a community where, in the words of the Psalmist, it is good and pleasant to be, for sisters and brothers to dwell in unity? What church wouldn't long to be described as the Christian apologist Tertullian spoke of his community in the third century: "Our care and love for one another have become our distinctive sign"?

Among the gifts bestowed upon us by Christ is the gift of community: the place where we can share our sorrows and joys, seek consolation in times of sadness, celebrate moments of happiness. It is a place - our way of existence - where we recognise, and are recognised by God's love, which beckons us to reach beyond ourselves, to be woven together into one Body. Christian community is a blessing, but it's not always smooth sailing. Being part of a community, especially when conflict arises, can be a formidable test of faith.

Conflict is an all-too-human experience, an element inherent in the fabric of our relationships. Churches are not exempt from this reality. Missteps occur, disputes arise, tempers flare, people get hurt. This is not an indication of a corrupt Church, but rather a reflection of the humanity within it. An inclination to conflict seems to be ingrained in our nature, a reality that even the Scriptures acknowledge. Even in Paradise discord found a foothold. Genesis brims with stories of feuds within the Patriarchs' families, while the Torah lays down conflict guidelines for addressing conflicts within Israel, a community bound not only by their national identity but also by their faith.

We don't experience our world as a place where people effortlessly come together in agreement and harmony. Rather, it often unfolds as a stage for competition, confrontation, conflict. As a Christian community, should we not strive to live differently? Shouldn't our

Christian identity prompt us to foster harmony by dealing with disagreements and conflicts with grace and compassion?

Conflict in church context is not a novel phenomenon. A cursory glance at the New Testament reveals ample evidence of discord within the earliest Christian communities.

Conflict within the church is not a novel phenomenon; it has existed since the early days of the disciples following Christ's resurrection. Conflict can take many forms, often evoking emotions such as fear, anger, guilt, and a reluctance to engage in open dialogue. Even within the most prayerful communities, conflict can escalate, transforming from a mere issue to resolve into an intractable struggle, with individuals becoming the focal point, and the very essence of the community becoming compromised.

Churches and other Christian communities often grapple with the complexities of conflict resolution. While Jesus' teachings emphasise peace-making and reconciliation, they sometimes remain weakly embedded in the cultural fabric of Christian communities. So, when disagreements and tensions arise, Christians can find themselves in troubled waters. The central question for churches is not how to entirely eliminate conflict, but rather how to handle it in a way that aligns with their values.

Those who relish structured approaches and clarity can only rejoice in the four-step conflict management tutorial that Jesus offers in today's Gospel passage: When there is sin or wrongdoing, confront it directly, face-to-face. If this doesn't yield, involve another party in the conversation. Should this also fail, bringing the matter before the entire community is the next step. If, even then, the conflict persists, treat the wrongdoer as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.

I always prefer to understand an algorithm before I apply it, so allow me to have a closer look at Jesus' guidelines. In essence, Jesus lays out a framework for engagement that is underpinned by the principles of love and respect. It all begins with a courageous act: the risk of engaging in honest conversation, to "go and point out the fault". We must not perceive this confrontation as a catastrophe, a last resort, but as a moment of truth, driven by love. Our aim should be genuine healing rather than the mere illusion of harmony.

Honest engagement is crucial, and so are discretion, kindness, and care, according to Jesus. We are called to protect the dignity of those involved, particularly in our culture marked by the tendency to revel in the downfall of others. We must remember our own fragility and susceptibility to error.

In his wisdom, Jesus acknowledges that a one-on-one conversation will always suffice. In such cases, we are encouraged to enlist the involvement of others, not to spread gossip or exacerbate the conflict but to ensure that the truth prevails as we work toward reconciliation.

“If the member refuses to listen, tell it to the church.” This particular principle may be the most challenging for us to accept, and it may even offend some among us. History offers grim reminders of self-criticism sessions and denunciation rallies, where individuals accused of being 'public enemies' were exposed and humiliated, often by those with whom they were closely associated.

However, the scriptures portray the church as an interdependent body, with each component reliant upon the others. Within this body, says St Paul, love for one another is a debt that can never be settled. When conflicts emerge within our midst, the stakes extend beyond individual emotions or personal liberty; they encompass the overall health and well-being of the entire body. Jesus goes so far as to assert that God's presence among us hinges upon the wholeness and vitality of the beloved community: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." It is within our unity, our interconnectedness, that God pledges His presence.

“If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” At first glance, this instruction may appear to give license to shun or “cancel” those with whom we experience deep conflict, ostracizing them as troublemakers or, at least, reducing them to silence. Indeed, history reveals instances when the church has taken such actions. However, remember how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors, such as Zacchaeus, or the Roman centurion’s servant, or the Samaritan woman at the well, or the Canaanite woman and her sick daughter. Each time, Jesus extended love, care, healing, hope, and compassion to outsiders. Therefore, even as we acknowledge and lament the brokenness, even as we recognize that an insider has become an "outsider," we are called to extend care and hold open the possibility of reconciliation and renewal.

Jesus doesn't merely present a radically distinct path to approach conflict, but also inspiration on how to build a countercultural community, where leaders serve, where the weak are nurtured and not cast aside, where those who have lost their way are sought and restored, where mercy and forgiveness are cultivated as precious virtues. It sets a high standard for genuine community – it requires Christ's real presence.

Undeniably, genuine community is challenging. It demands courage and a willingness to stand by one another, bear with one another. Yet it is also powerful – it bears witness to the profound transformation and healing that Christ's presence can bring about. It may be demanding work, but it is work that is unequivocally worth undertaking—always and without exception.

Amen.

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