

## Introduction to the meeting on openness and trust between generations

We live in an extremely individualistic society. In our post-modern existence we are free, both young and old, men and women, and we are given the possibility to shape our own lives. In fact sometimes it seems that we are expected to create it all; our own image, our career, our specific philosophy of life and our relations. This is often presented as the advantage of our Western lifestyle. But hasn't it also become a burden for us? And don't we miss the given frames within which we can rest - be they the family, the Church or simply a tradition?

Generational problems (old peoples' loneliness, the break-up of marriages, young peoples' rootlessness) result from this dissolution of given societal frames. We are individuals. We are not people empowered by the fact that we belong to our family, our Church or a tradition. We have the possibility to choose everything, but actually many long for the security and meaning that given tasks, given duties and given relations actually provide. That said, it is obvious that sometimes the challenge in life is to free oneself from certain relations or traditions. But that is, as I see it, not the biggest problem in the society I live in.

In my country I observe that a distinct culture for every generation is developing. The old and retired people move to Spain to enjoy life after having worked so hard all their life, 'they deserve it' and nothing binds them. The young develop a culture of their own, inaccessible to others, we leave them alone, expect nothing of them. Even the children have their own culture. People of my age are still busy realizing themselves and work hard to keep up all self-developing activities also after the kids have been born. Ultimately we are losing something, in many ways the result is loneliness.

So, is there a natural frame we have lost touch with? The philosopher John Locke (1632) describes a natural and God-given pattern of relations among generations. The parents' main purpose is to pass on to their children an understanding of the law, both God's law and the country's law, so that the children when they grow up are capable of living as free people. It is thus understood that you cannot be free without understanding the law and trying to live according to it. When the children have acquired this reason at a certain age the patterns have to let them go. The child is equal to the father as a free person. However, the child's duty after leaving his parents is forever to honour and respect them. In this way all stages of our life cycle offers certain duties and blessings and generations are tied together.

Even if this is just a model - many people do not have parents any longer and many do not have children - I still think we all need to search for and accept that we have been given certain relations, a certain heritage, and that one of the main purposes in life is to work on these relations and within these given frames.

There is a very interesting parable in the Bible called the prodigal son. The youngest son asks for his share and goes out and wastes it all. He ends up looking after and eating with the pigs before he realizes that he can return to his home and his father. The older brother is angered by the return, but the father meets the youngest son with open arms and even throws a big party to celebrate. There are many aspects of this parable. One thing it tells us is that although all of us need to leave the home we were born into and go out and create our own reality, we must all discover that which was of value in our home, that which was there all the time. The other point is that the second generation might have to spend some time in the pig sty before it can discover and pass on the good parts of the heritage. Parents on their side might not like this, but they have to accept it.

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