

## Grappling with inevitable tensions

# Diversity: A Creative Potential

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*Like all families, religious communities are not lacking in tensions that arise from the diversity among their members, and varied cultures and ages can accentuate those tensions. Thus, adequate paths of accompaniment must be put in place. One example is an initiative in service to Focolare Movement communities that was recently featured in our sister magazine, Das Prisma, which we are reprinting in an adapted form here in Ekklesia. Ansgar Bock is a married educator and a trainer, consultant and coach near Munich (Germany). Gabriele Müller is an anesthesiologist specializing in pain and palliative care.*

### The goal

People living in communities inevitably develop, often unconsciously, patterns, rituals and customs that hold the community together and provide a framework for common life. At times, however, changes to these habits are needed to adapt to new demands in living together. Initiatives in this direction can come from individual members or even from those at the leadership level. However, we often find that training for individual members alone is insufficient to change habits within a community or to revitalize relationships that have stalled. For this reason, we developed a supplement to ongoing formation initiatives aimed at both individuals and shared community retreats, in the form of a four-day course intended for entire Focolare communities.

The preparatory team consists of 13 people, qualified in related fields of psychology, pedagogy, theology and sociology, and above all united by the same lifestyle of self-giving to God. We commit ourselves to live first and foremost among ourselves what we wish to offer to retreat participants: mutual love that arrives to the readiness of the gift of one's life; frankness and sincerity in speaking (*parrhesia*), authenticity, imagination and creativity.

So far, a total of 40 "focolares" have participated, in all about 400 people. We establish a dialogue with the participating communities even before the course. From those meetings, emerge topics which give a direction to the course: one's own biography, communication, the "you" (the other, the person in front of me) in his or her diversity, and conflict management. From a methodological point of view, we use diverse approaches: short learning sessions, times for personal reflection, group dialogue, practical and creative exercises, games, meditations, liturgical celebrations.

## **Concrete approaches to diversity and conflict management**

A topic representing a particular challenge for participants (and us in the preparatory team) is the perception and management of differences, tensions, and conflicts. We describe below a few situations taken from our retreats, in which the theme of conflict resolution was addressed. As in all the other phases of the programs, emphasis is not on theoretical insights, but above all on short, clear informational interventions followed by practical exercises.

In a brief introduction we present the topic in four steps, with many examples from concrete experiences in communities and also from family situations. Characteristic conflicts that occur in family life can also be found, at least in part, in the life of Focolare communities.

### **Emergence and development of conflicts**

Conflicts mostly begin with mild tensions. If these do not find a solution, a dynamic is generated in which emotions take over and our ability to perceive is diminished. The words of Ruth C. Cohn<sup>2</sup>, "Priority must be given to dysfunctions", contains great wisdom. Even if we do not pay attention to dysfunctions, they will still take over. Then, it becomes not so much a situation of *having* a conflict, but rather that the conflict *has us*. Strong emotions then emerge, like a sense of overwhelming helplessness. Stress, and emotions such as fear, anger, or seeming impassés, take over.

### **Suppressed conflicts**

Repressing conflicts can manifest in varied forms of behavior: we are silent, we do not react; or we are excessively nice. We may avoid the problem by changing subjects or distancing ourselves, perhaps placing ourselves in a sacrificial attitude, such as 'I unite my suffering to that of Jesus crucified, I endure it with him on the cross'. It can also happen that we fixate on certain positions and demands. Or we react emotionally, with irritation, crying, anger, and then we risk accusing or hurting the other. Or we repress all this. The fact remains that we suffer and nothing changes. We become stuck in patterns that rob us of our creative vitality. By avoiding these points of friction, we are then surprised that we do not make progress.

### **Conflicts as an opportunity for change**

"Dysfunctions must be given priority". Tensions and conflicts contain potentials for change. They can be transformed, like firewood, into energy and more dynamic relationships. Here we present four possible steps for dealing with conflicts:

#### *Recognize*

We are the people that we are. And as such, we are welcomed by God, even with all our contradictions, wounds, negative emotions, disappointments, and failures. There is room for everything. I am fine as I am. And the other is also fine as he or she is. How freeing it is to allow oneself to be permeated by this faith!

#### *Awareness and giving a name*

The perception of what I am and what the other is, can emerge more clearly when we put ourselves in "pause" mode for a moment. In other words, when we feel a stiffening in ourselves

or a change in the atmosphere relative to our relationships, when we realize we are tense and are not free, or when we perceive other signs of a conflict, it is useful to stop for a moment and become aware of what is irritating us. It is good to ask ourselves: "What exactly I am feeling?" Can I give a 'name' to that thing that is still indefinable in myself or in relating to another? Can I admit that I am sad or annoyed or helpless, or even envious or with a feeling of dislike and judgement towards another?

Focolare foundress, Chiara Lubich, invited a discovering, a putting a 'face', to our sufferings, or the giving of a 'name' to Jesus in his abandonment on the cross. In that moment on the cross, Jesus felt misunderstood, disappointed, alone, abandoned... By naming what I am feeling, it is possible for me to give a name to my suffering and welcome another in his diversity for me, in what is 'foreign' in them for me. Then from this, it may happen that I learn something about the other person's needs, too, such as a desire for peace of mind or why they are particularly mindful of costs at the grocery store. In this way, I am able to even allow my Christian faith to be renewed by the way a fellow believer practices their faith, and this becomes an experience of the resurrection in everyday life!

#### *Speaking with sincerity*

The Paschal experience of Thomas the Apostle can be a light for further resolving conflicts. Thomas recognized the Lord by his wounds. By trusting another – even if it asks of us a step – we can find the courage to show our wounds, make ourselves vulnerable, and draw closer to another. Jesus had the courage to show the disciples his disappointment and the wounds caused by them and opened the way to a new stage in communion, and an experience of peace. In speaking gently about what stands between us and what weighs on a relationship, it's possible to discover one another in new, deeper ways. I take responsibility for myself, for ourselves, and for our togetherness. It is a responsibility that no one else can assume for me.

#### *Clarification*

In situations of tension or conflict, it can be useful to discuss with a third person and reflect together on one's own experience. This is not to speak ill of the person with whom I find myself in difficulty, but to become more aware of my own emotions and reactions, and to identify constructive ways of interacting. Such a friend can help me put myself on "pause" mode and allow me to name what is wrong.

There are also times when we fear a confrontation, for fear of possible reactions, like rigidity, tears or even aggressive responses. In these cases, an uninvolved third party helps in reflecting on relationships and discovering new ways of seeing one another. It's not about finding perfect solutions, but identifying next steps that can be taken together, in the here and now.

#### **Further work on conflict**

During this course we provide several hours in which a focolare community has needed time to experience the creative and generative forces arising from tensions and conflicts. Each community is accompanied by one of the members of the preparatory group. We are careful during these dialogues to ensure that the content already presented and deepened, can be

applied and put to good use practically, such as in listening, the formulation of questions, an awareness of biographical elements, feedback, etc.

Communities are invited to awaken, with confidence and courage, the "sleeping dogs", and respectfully look together at what has been "hidden under the carpet" and ask themselves to what extent the behavior adopted so far has been useful, or to what extent it can be changed. This is always done, however, with the necessary respect for what the group wishes to address, with care and sensitivity toward individuals, and a realistic assessment of what is possible.

### **What remains**

One of the program objectives is to provide "tools" that facilitate a serene and successful community life, in which the presence of "Jesus in the midst" can be experienced. Such work on tensions and conflicts can only be understood in the overall context of the four days. After multiple programs concluded, based on feedback and sustainability over time, we have seen that the retreats have actually helped to face life challenges together in a more open manner. During the process, there are sometimes individual, personal needs for growth that block community life. Where available, these can be addressed with the help of competent professionals in the period afterwards.

To conclude, we can share the feedback of one participant that speaks to the potential of this kind of community accompaniment: "The course... was a new beginning. We started with some concrete proposals to improve our communication. Problems have not disappeared, but by calling them by name and recognizing them, we can confront them on a daily basis, starting again each time we fall back into old patterns and relational models. For me, it meant learning to communicate what I feel without fear, accepting my story in all its aspects, but above all trusting in the mercy and love of others. [...] God has called me with everything that is part of who I am, and even my weaknesses can become a gift for unity."

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- <sup>1</sup> Focolares include single people living together, and married people live in their families who are committed to sharing in the life of communion, in the spirit of the evangelical counsels.
  - <sup>2</sup> Ruth C. Cohn (1912-2010), a German psychotherapist, lived for over 30 years in the United States and gave rise to a pedagogical and group method known as *Theme-Centered-Interaction* (TCI).