A culture of inclusive solidarity

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Archbishop Roland Minnerath

Allow me to mention a modest initiative taken at the level of my diocese. As you know, the Church’s mission is threefold: teach, celebrate, and serve. Our service takes various forms. We have many services of solidarity. We decided to give a sign of how we conceive solidarity and integration of marginalized. We created a micro-credit foundation called RITA which stands for “Find back Initiative through Job and Autonomy”. We finance autonomous workers with loans at rate zero and we offer advice and monitoring to management. We reach only little entrepreneurs. They pay back their loans and become independent. I used to say that in this way we fulfill the mandate to help the poor, not by occasional charities which maintain the poor in his poverty, but by giving them a chance to recover their autonomy and dignity and take care of themselves and their families. This project has obviously modest dimensions. But we wanted to give a sign to society at large: approach the problems of marginalization at the grassroots, in a bottom-up perspective through realizations that you can follow and of which you can reasonably measure the success. The gate into self-reliance is the access to a decent work.

My conviction is that on the local level, integration through work and dignity is always possible. Only two conditions are required: the person in need must want to work herself out of her situation and the helpers must convert themselves into advisers. All must be active. There is no integration through one-sided assistance on the one hand and passive acceptance on the other.

Marginalized people. If we look at marginalized people worldwide with the help of UN statistics and development programs we meet another dimension which I fear we cannot fully grasp nor address. This does not mean that global programs should be given up. It just reminds us that integration of marginalized people starts in our own neighbourhood.

Some people become marginalized because they have been ejected from the market, they lose their job, they abandoned their family; they fell out of the social protection network. Some remain voluntarily marginalized. It is well known that some people have given up any will and energy to come back in the social system. They are marginalized for ever. We cannot help people to come out of marginalization against their will.

Others became marginalized as a consequence of unexpected global events, for instance because they are migrants and failed to socialize in a new cultural context. Unsuccessful attempts at integration may create huge feelings of frustration ending up in irresponsible conduct. Last summer we witnessed in Nice, Wurzburg or Rouen dramatic episodes of individuals who converted their frustration into hatred and murder with all sorts of ideological undertones.

Here we touch the core of Catholic Social Teaching (CST): the human person. Who cares today to lay out a whole rationale on Integration of Marginalized People starting from the inherent needs of the human person? We say that the human person is a social being by his very nature, so nobody can live without developing some interaction with others. This means that solidarity is not optional. All forms of society are based on solidarity among their members. Only extreme individualistic ideologies propagate the wrong assumption that an individual can live and grow without the help of others. We receive much more from society than all we can contribute to it. A child born today will profit from all the knowledge, skill, services accumulated along human history. Whether it will bring a drop into the sea is not taken for granted.

Solidarity is one of the four pillars of CST. So states the famous Encyclical Pacem in terris (1963) of John XXIII. Actually, solidarity is the modern name for “social love” which belongs to the Aristotelian and Thomistic social philosophy, which suggested that all society tends to become a community, when the social bond grows up from the inner commitment of each member for the common good and the well-being of all.

The four pillars are Freedom, Truth, Solidarity and Justice. You can build no human worth social model without having these four interacting elements.

We should ask ourselves: can solidarity be selective? In our Christian view, the answer has been given by the parable of the Good Samaritan. Who is my neighbour? Not the person of my tribe, nation or religion, but
any human person that crosses my road and needs my help. This answer is not obvious to everybody and we have to cope with it particularly in migration issues. Starting from the dignity of each human person, we shall consider her need for help, not where she comes from.

The migrant waves coming from Africa, Afghanistan and Middle East are generally received in Europe without discrimination as to their ethnic or religious origin. Yet, some host countries set up fences, numbers, quotas and mistrust. Once distributed in the different local communities, apprehensions arose about how to initiate an integration process. It became obvious that the former experience of integrating immigrants from Southern or Eastern Europe was much easier as these persons had a Christian background and the same basic values and way of life. Integrating Muslim populations, for the time being, is something extremely different. Maybe Europeans do not look at religion, but Muslims bring with them a religion which is at the same time a social bond and a way of life. Muslims are also targeted by extremist wahabite movements trying to convince them that they have to fight the “unbelievers” and establish a world caliphate on earth.

So integration is possible only as far as the persons involved really want to make the effort to start a new life far from their roots. Huge questions arise when the proportion of immigrants becomes high enough to challenge the local population’s balance. Solidarity does not discriminate. Yet each person is a world.

Our wish is to integrate. Who wants to be integrated? Integration has to be fundamentally distinguished from assimilation. Nationalistic ideologies admit strangers on the condition that they cease to be what they are and become what their hosts are. They are supposed to leave at the borders their language, their mentality, their way of life, maybe their religion. Assimilation does not fit with the respect due to human dignity. A person who migrates to another country is not an empty shell. She has her own history, values, relationships, her beliefs and hopes. Assimilation would mean: forget what you are, we are going to remake your personality, change your inner structure and your own self. Now you are we. This is precisely what they do not want.

Integration should be something different. It means: we take you as you are and we are ready to help you become a member of our community, if this is your wish. This requires from you a big effort of adaptation, and willingness to cooperate in your new life context.

The person who has been compelled to leave her native country will contact fellow countrymen abroad who are in the same situation. They will form a community within their new homeland. In Anglo-Saxon cultural areas this phenomenon is generally admitted. In other contexts, like France, “communitarianism” is strongly rejected, at least in official discourse.

USA has a culture of federating “communities”, with the risk of creating antagonism. France is allergic to such a thing, with the risk of remaining blind to what really happens. France deals with individuals as with abstract entities who have no specific background, no personal religion, no traditions, they are just supposed to enter into a pre-established format, consisting of the so-called “values of the Republic”.

What does integration mean then? What do we propose with “social and cultural integration”?

In matters of integration, there is no unique model. Integration must go with a specification: integration through work, integration at school, integration in learning the local language. A second step would be integration into citizenship according to the law of the host country: a resident or a citizen. One thing is clear: integration must preserve the private sphere as far as freedom of conscience and religion are concerned. But problems arise as soon as you switch to family life. Migrants must accept the laws of their host country. In Islam family laws are linked with religious law. Are Muslim people ready to give up some of their customs on this extremely sensitive point? Would they clearly recognize the equal dignity and rights of women and men, the freedom to marry a non-Muslim and to change their religion?

Integration means that we are searching what can be universally requested from all without hurting their dignity. What we can expect is a deeper awareness of the needs of marginalized people and their right to be recognized in their dignity.

Is there a common heritage that all human persons may invoke as they start a new life in the middle of established communities? The social and value systems of world cultures are so disparate that it seems quite useless to find out what they all have in common.

The CST proposes a specific approach. This approach has its secular expression in the philosophy of universal human rights. But we know that universality is precisely jeopardized by culture-based requests.

CST has the pretention to propose principles of social life valuable everywhere. This is an absolute challenge to the current trends in all societies. Yet, precisely when he is mistreated the human being reveals his universal needs. Integration starts with meeting the basic needs: food, shelter, health, education. The core of all social action must be the defence of human dignity.
Integration is possible if society develops its integrative capacities on two distinct levels:

- The level of common human values as considered in the Declarations of human rights. The fundamental ethical values grounded in the very nature of human beings belong to that level. The State of law is at the service of these values.

- The level of personal and community faith and beliefs that enforce and do not contradict the natural ethical level.

Only where such a distinction functions, integration without reduction or assimilation is possible. People remain with their religious or philosophical worldviews, but respect the rules of multicultural societies and give their contribution to the common good. We do not ignore that this distinction, which comes from Christianity, is most challenged in non-western societies. But there is no other way to reduce marginalization of immigrants.

Social systems should meet the basic needs of human persons and avoid marginalizing people by considering the following steps:

1. First detect and correct abuses such as discrimination of migrants, foreigners, of children or women in the name of ideologies or religions. These are basic human rights.

2. Stop discrimination based on ethnical origin on the market place. Give everyone a chance in education and development of skills.

3. Give priority in the local economy to creating jobs for all.

4. Give space to initiatives coming from the civil society which meet local needs.

5. Give people who have projects a chance to create their own enterprise.

This was my starting point. The bottom-up process is a certainly a key to reducing marginalization.