

Mercy and Solidarity

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Part 1

Thank you to Fr David Birchall, and to the Ignatian Spirituality Centre, for the invitation to speak to you, this morning. I am living and working in Dublin's fair city, although I would rather be with you face to face in Glasgow, which is another wonderful city, and which will be the focus of world attention later this year, when it hosts the UN COP26 Conference on Climate Change. We know how important this event will be; it is one of the last remaining opportunities for the world's powers to work together for a strategy to alleviate climate change. It will be interesting to see whether these talks have a different feel as a result of the COVID pandemic. COVID has been a truly global catastrophe which has brought us to anew awareness of our connectedness to everyone else on the planet. COVID has affected everyone, in the global north and the global south. We often hear the phrase, 'we are all in the same boat'.

COVID has affected us all- but has it united us? There have been moments of solidarity and unity, but the pandemic has also highlighted the huge divisions among peoples, and too often has widened the gulf between them rather than brought people closer. To cite Pope Francis, we can respond by building bridges, or by building walls. And in the last year, we have seen both.

What I will be doing in these three sessions will, I hope, be fairly straightforward. I will be reflecting upon some of the key themes in the writings of Pope Francis, most particularly his encyclical on solidarity, *Fratelli Tutti*. This is an interesting and important document, because Francis started writing it before the COVID crisis. He wanted to talk about the need for solidarity and social fraternity, and found that these concepts have a new urgency.

I will be thinking about these themes in the light of an important Christian thinker called René Girard, a French philosopher who lived and worked in the United States for most of his life. Girard died in 2015, aged 92. He was originally trained as a medieval historian, though for most of his career he taught French literature. Girard became very interested in the relationship between religion, violence and culture; and it was through his teaching of literature that he came to a new appreciation of Christianity as a way out of the most deep-seated challenges that we face as human beings.

Girard's philosophy can get quite complex, and parts of it are controversial. I will not be going into his ideas in any detail, but I would simply say two things at this point. Firstly, that Girard himself returned to his Catholic faith after many years away from the Church. This makes him unusual among modern intellectuals, especially French ones, although in recent years a number of European philosophers have expressed a new interest in religion.

Secondly, Girard has a distinctive understanding of human nature, and of the importance of Christianity, which helps us make fresh sense of the world and its challenges. In fact much of what he says might be familiar to us: probably if you had a good understanding of the gospel of John and of the writings of St Augustine, you would have a good grasp of Girard's key ideas. What makes him exciting is that he develops these ideas in a kind of conversation with the big thinkers of the modern age: philosophers like Hegel and Nietzsche, or Sigmund Freud, and so on. He enable us to understand these thinkers better and top respond to their challenges. This is important, because Christianity is not always very good at engaging with the world of secular thought. Girard helps us to build bridges, not walls.

WE will at the detail of this thought a bit later, but for now let's keep a focus on what is happening with the COP26 conference. In a few months' time, the world will try to take a look at itself, and decide what we need to do- not as countries, or tribes, or power blocs or continents, but as one planet, as a single family living in 'our common home'. It will try to take a global view, a view which Pope Francis describes as 'without borders'. There is one image which Pope Francis wants us to have and which he presents very early on in *Fratelli Tutti*. That is the famous story of St Francis, 8,000 years ago, undertaking a dangerous and courageous journey to meet the Sultan Malik-el-Kamil, in Egypt. I would like us to pause and take in this important passage from paragraphs 3-4 of *Fratelli Tutti*, which sets the scene for the encyclical. The passage is entitled 'Without borders'

There is an episode in the life of Saint Francis that shows his openness of heart, which knew no bounds and transcended differences of origin, nationality, colour or religion. It was his visit to Sultan Malik-el-Kamil, in Egypt, which entailed considerable hardship, given Francis' poverty, his scarce resources, the great distances to be travelled and their differences of language, culture and religion. That journey, undertaken at the time of the Crusades, further demonstrated the breadth and grandeur of his love, which sought to embrace everyone. Francis' fidelity to his Lord was commensurate with his love for his brothers and sisters. Unconcerned for the hardships and dangers involved, Francis went to meet the Sultan with the same attitude that he instilled in his disciples: if they found themselves "among the Saracens and other nonbelievers", without renouncing their own identity they were not to "engage in arguments or disputes, but to be subject to every human creature for God's sake". In the context of the times, this was an extraordinary recommendation. We are impressed that some eight hundred years ago Saint Francis urged that all forms of hostility or conflict be avoided and that a humble and fraternal "subjection" be shown to those who did not share his faith. ... In the world of that time, bristling with watchtowers and defensive walls, cities were a theatre of brutal wars between powerful families, even as poverty was spreading through the countryside. Yet there Francis was able to welcome true peace into his heart and free himself of the desire to wield power over others. He became one of the poor and sought to live in harmony with all. Francis has inspired these pages.

Part 2

What do we see when we look globally, when we see ourselves globally? Let me refer to two contrasting descriptions of a 'global' view. The first is from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius. This is the meditation upon the Incarnation, which is one of the important meditations in the *Exercises*, where Ignatius invites the person praying to imagine the Three Persons of the Trinity looking down upon the whole expanse or circuit of all the earth. What they see is not good: the world is filled with human beings, who 'swear and blaspheme, wound, kill and go down to hell'. Then Persons confer as to what should be done. It is a bit like the gods and goddesses of Olympus in the Greek myths-, except that the Greek deities argue among themselves, while the persons of the Trinity are united in love and concern for humanity.

The Second Person then offers himself as the one who will enter into this human reality, and bring about salvation. Then the camera zooms in from the cosmic overview ... to a room in a house in Nazareth, where an angel appears to a young woman ... "and the Virgin's name was Mary".

That is one picture of the 'global'. Things are going catastrophically wrong with the human race, and God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, has to come into human history in order to sort things out. It is a bit like getting a man in to fix the boiler (the poet W.H. Auden refers to Jesus as the 'mild engineer'). It is not a happy or pleasant picture to take in.

Here is another picture: in my least favourite song ever, John Lennon invites us to imagine a world with no walls, only bridges. 'Imagine no possessions', 'nothing to kill or die for, and no religion too'. Imagine, in other words, a world in which everyone is the same, without distinction of nationality, religion, race or economic status:

'You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one.
I hope some day you'll join us
And the world will live as one.'

Of course this sounds wonderful: it is about taking down the artificial walls which humans construct between us, so surely we should be attracted to it, we should become dreamers like John Lennon. I hope that after a few moments' reflection you will appreciate why I find this song so annoying, especially when it is presented so enthusiastically as a recipe for peace and global harmony. My point is that it is the exact opposite: a sustained attempt to remove the distinctions between people will increase tension and conflict, not decrease it. If you say to someone who has deeply-held identity whether it is nationalist or religious, that what they hold most precious is in fact not really important, and they should just let go of it, what will be the likely reaction? A common enough reaction is for that person to double-down on their identity, if they feel that identity is under threat: whether

they be a Texan or a New Yorker, a Catholic or a Protestant, a Sunni or a Shia Muslim, a feminist or a white supremacist. The wall will be built up higher.

For many people, this is what has happened in the last few decades, as a result of the process we call 'globalization'. The economic and cultural forces which have brought us closer together- global trade, the internet, and so on- have also brought about a homogenization which many communities have found threatening. Commentators would see this as one of the causes of fundamentalism, as religious groups turn inwards in response to a globalizing and modernising world; it would also explain the resurgence of nationalism and a new resistance to multinational cooperation. The crisis of organizations such as the European Community and the United Nations is a part of this, as groups feel their identity- their 'sovereignty'- is under threat.

We could say that the recent controversy around the big football clubs in Europe, and their failed attempt to form a European Super League, is a dramatic example; their supporters have finally started to resist the logic of globalization which was taking their clubs away from them.

John Lennon's anthem has been described as the 'globalization song'. If we followed its recipe for world peace, we would find ourselves with more mistrust, more conflicts than ever. There would be more walls, and higher. ...

What I am proposing for the start of our reflection, therefore, is to meditate upon the world, as Ignatius did. Ignatius saw a world of human beings, swearing, blaspheming, killing, a world speeding toward damnation. St Francis, in the words of Pope Francis, knew a world 'bristling with watchtowers and defensive walls, where cities were a theatre of brutal wars between powerful families, even as poverty was spreading through the countryside'.

In our own time, John Lennon, also looks with sorrow upon a world which has careered out of control. For Ignatius, the answer can only come from outside the world, as Christ comes into the world not to condemn it but to save. For John Lennon, the answer is to dream, to imagine that things can be different; if only enough of us dream in this way, 'the world will be as one'. These are two visions of the world, two visions of the world, and how the world may be saved. They are not the same: perhaps we have to choose between them?