

Session II: A Better Kind of Politics

In the first session we began to look at *Fratelli Tutti*, the Pope's call upon the world to work toward social fraternity. It is a powerful and poignant document because it comes during the COVID crisis, which has exposed both the strengths and the limitations of human solidarity in a time of global crisis.

Fratelli Tutti builds on *Laudato Si'* and its 'integral ecology', that is, an awareness of the interconnected of the crises which affect us in our common home. We cannot think about the ecological crisis without addressing the many social injustices, such as the disparity of wealth and the political fragility of so many of the human family. So the social teaching of Pope Francis is timely as we approach the COP26 conference. How can this teaching be a resource for us during this crucial time?

Fratelli Tutti calls for a 'better kind of politics', one in which we learn to be submissive to 'every other human being' (following the example of St Francis meeting the Sultan). A world in which we seek to build bridges rather than walls, with hearts 'open to the whole world'. Time again, Francis uses phrases like 'without borders'. It is a beautiful, passionate vision.

What we also did in the first session, however, was to problematize this vision. That is we began to look at why this ideal is not at all straightforward, and why we need to think it through a bit more. This is why our patron this evening is 'Mary, Undoer of Knots'. This the painting by Johann Georg Melchior Schmidtner (1700) in Augsburg, Bavaria, which gave Jorge Bergoglio such consolation during a difficult period of his life.

I cite this painting now, because we have a few knots to untie!

The big knot is simple to describe. Imagining or working for a world without borders, a world of bridges rather than walls, may not in fact bring about peace. It may actually have just the opposite effect. Such a vision, of erasing the differences between people, carries the danger of increasing fear, suspicion and tension between peoples, rather than decreasing them. "Wouldn't it be nice if we were all the same" is a recipe for disaster not harmony. As I have suggested, this is why the popularity of John Lennon's *Imagine* is so worrying. It suggests that so many people have a mistaken or inadequate view of what makes us human, and how human beings behave.

The thinker who captures this well is the French American philosopher René Girard, and we will look more closely at his ideas shortly. But Girard would insist that his important ideas are contained in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, and we will find most of them depicted in the gospel of John, and in the writings of St Augustine. Nick King spoke last week about the Creation narratives, and how these beautiful ancient texts repeatedly give examples of separations, and distinctions, as the ways in which God replaces chaos with order. Human beings are likewise subject to prohibitions, obviously the one concerning the forbidden fruit, but also need to be distinguished from deities.

As Nick stressed, these parameters are in place for human flourishing; when we transgress them, we bring disaster on ourselves.

And yet, the New Testament is full of examples of God transgressing the very boundaries He himself has previously put in place. As Jan has noted, the parable of the Good Samaritan blows apart our preconceptions of “who is my neighbour”. With Peter, Paul, and the earliest Christians, the barriers which rigidly demarcated Jews from the Gentile world are dismantled, such as circumcision and dietary laws.

And the greatest transgression of all, is God’s erasing the barrier between Godself and humanity, as the Word becomes flesh. God does not do social distancing.

So here is our knot. Christian faith, and existence in general, seems to be about how we negotiate parameters and the questions of identity which they give rise to. The most fundamental distinctions are between sacred and profane, between human and non-human or divine. But faith is not simply about staying with an existing order; we are called to move beyond- transgress- in some many ways, to let go of cherished identities. What are we to make of this contradiction or paradox, where fidelity to God involves maintaining distinctions and respecting boundaries, on the one hand; and overriding those distinctions on the other?

René Girard helps us to make sense of the paradox; or rather, he points to the ways in which the biblical revelation shows us this paradox, and points to its resolution. Ultimately, it means making sense of two different experiences of ‘the sacred’. The first is the **false sacred**, when human beings projecting the worst of our fears and cruelties onto an imaginary deity, so that we make God in our own image. The second, the **true sacred**, is the revelation when God finally manages to convince us of what he is really like, above all in the person of Jesus who tells us such wonderful stories about his Father.

The true God revealed by Jesus is our heavenly Father. William Blake has a lovely nickname for the cruel tyrannical figure who is the false sacred, he calls him Nobodaddy.

Girard’s theory is briefly summed up as three insights or assertions:

- Our desires are **mimetic** (or imitated, ‘second-hand’). As Augustine puts it, ‘our hearts are restless’ until they rest in God. This basic instability means that we look to each other to find out what and how we should desire. And because our desires are all converging on the same thing, there is an inherent tendency for our desires to lead us into rivalry and even violence.
- The instability of human desire and its conflictual tendency can have destabilising effects on a community, and these can quickly get out of control. In pre-state societies, without police or judicial systems, the remedy which a group hits upon to establish or restore order is still familiar to us. That is, the group lights upon a vulnerable or marginal individual or group of individuals, and excludes them from the group entirely. If the crisis is serious enough, the victims may even be executed. Girard regarded this process as the origin of religious sacrifice. He gives it an everyday name: ‘**scapegoating**’.

- According to Girard the Bible is the record of God's attempt over centuries to show us the truth about ourselves: about the nature of our desire, and about how we manage social conflict, which we then dress up as religion. The words of Caiaphas in the Fourth Gospel, about one man dying so that the people does not perish, captures the logic of scapegoating and also God's response, when he hands over Jesus Christ, the lamb slain since the foundation of the world. By exposing the mimetic mechanism, we begin to loosen its grip on us, and we are freed to act in new, more peaceful ways.

Mimetic desire; scapegoating; the power of the gospel in helping us to overcoming mimetic desire and scapegoating. These are the three building blocks of Girard's mimetic desire. They also point to the reality that finding 'a better kind of politics' requires us to find a different way of being human.

The three building blocks are neatly illustrated in five paintings by William Blake.

- Adam and Eve in bliss ... until she sees the serpent
- Job being confronted by his righteous 'friends', followed by Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac; also, a painting called 'the Blasphemer'
- Jesus turning the mob away from the woman taken in adultery (John 8: 1-11)

Girard's theory has political implications, which we will talk about a bit more of there is time. It would seem to correspond to an 'Augustinian' vision, which does not expect much of human beings by way of cooperation with each other. The best we can hope for is control our worst instinct and protect ourselves from one another. A more optimistic account looks to Aquinas and Aristotle to argue that human beings are naturally social and political, and are well capable of interacting positively and healthily.

Two visions of humanity and what we are like. Look at the world around us; which of these looks the more accurate?

Pope Francis has a distinctive and positive outlook on humanity's capacity to co-operate and flourish: to build bridges across divisions, not simply to live in fear behind our 'gated communities'. This vision derives in part from his experience of politics in Argentina, where a distinctive kind of liberation theology was developed, called the 'theology of the people' (*teología del pueblo*). It is a 'populist' style of political action; this is why he is keen in *Fratelli Tutti* to distinguish between positive and destructive forms of 'populism'.

We will look more closely at this in the final session, but I conclude here with one important aspect of Francis' vision. One of the maxims from the *teología del pueblo* is that '**time is greater than space**'. It is a curious phrase, but he uses it a lot: to the young people at WYD in Brazil, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, in *Amoris Laetitia*. The Church, he believes should be more concerned with initiating processes than with occupying spaces. This means a more effective way of being political, 'a better kind of politics'. To understand it, you might want to read, and meditate upon, Matthew 13: 24-30, the parable of the wheat and the weeds.

If we understand what Francis is trying to stress with this phrase, we will come very close to the heart of political theological vision.