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Chapter 6



Togetherness

The Miracle of Walking on the Floor

The Christian community gathers in displacement and in so doing discovers and proclaims a new way of being together. There are many motives that bring people together. People often come together to defend themselves against common dangers or to protect common values. People also come together because of shared likes or dislikes. Hatred as well as fear can create togetherness. After the resurrection of Christ, the disciples were together in a closed room “for fear of the authorities” (Jn 20:19), and the rulers, elders, and scribes came together in Jerusalem because of their shared annoyance with Peter and his followers (Ac 4:5).

The togetherness of the Christian community, however, is not the result of shared anger or anxiety; it grows from a deep sense of being called together to make God’s compassion visible in the concreteness of everyday living. In the Acts of the Apostles, we get a glimpse of this new togetherness: “The faithful all *lived together* and owned everything in common . . . Day by day the Lord added to

their *community* [literally: their togetherness] those destined to be saved” (Ac 2:44–47). The Christian community is not driven together but drawn together. By leaving the ordinary and proper places and responding to the call to follow Christ, people with very different backgrounds discover each other as fellow travelers brought together in common discipleship.

It is important to realize that voluntary displacement is not a goal in itself; it is meaningful only when it gathers us together in a new way. Voluntary displacement, as the Gospel presents it, leads us to understand each other as women and men with similar needs and struggles and to meet each other with an awareness of a common vulnerability. Therefore, no form of displacement is authentic if it does not bring us closer together. If we displace ourselves to be special, unique, or outstanding, we simply exhibit subtle forms of competitiveness that lead not to community but to elitism. Those entering monasteries or leaving their countries do so only in the spirit of the Gospel when this brings them closer to their brothers and sisters in the human family.

It is remarkable how many people still think of priests, nuns, monks, and hermits as constituting a spiritual elite. They speak of them as people living in another world, having their own mysterious practices, and enjoying a special connection with God. The danger of this way of thinking is that it divides the people of God into “ordinary” Christians and “special” Christians, with the result that voluntary displacement no longer leads to togetherness but to separation. True displacement, however, evokes a deep new awareness of solidarity. The criterion for any form of detachment, any form of “leaving home,” is the degree to which it reveals the common ground on which we stand together.

This is well illustrated by an event that took place at a circus in New Haven, Connecticut. After many acts of lion tamers and acrobats, the high-wire artist Philippe Petit entered the arena. This

agile little Frenchman was going to ask for a kind of attention quite different from that required by the other artists. His act was not as glamorous as you might have expected. In a very playful way, he walked on a steel wire stretched between two small towers, making it seem more like a dance than a balancing act. He acted as if he were conquering the towers and made people laugh with his easy jumps. But then something unusual took place which revealed his real talent. At the end of his performance, he walked down on a wire strung between the tower and the sandy floor. Since this was extremely difficult, everyone followed his movements with special attention. You could see people biting their nails and exclaiming, "How is it possible? How can he do it?"

Attention as well as tension grew and all kept their eyes on his outstretched arms. Everyone was so engrossed in his act that no one realized that for five seconds Philippe had been walking on the safe floor! Only after he himself looked down to the floor with a puzzled face and then up to the stands with happily surprised eyes did the tension break and everyone explode into roaring applause. That indeed was the real artistic moment, because Philippe, the artist, had been able to make his viewers look with admiration at an act that everyone else could do too: walking on the floor! The great talent of this high-wire artist was not so much that he could evoke admiration for an act nobody could imitate, but that he could make us look with amazement at something we can all do together. Therefore, the applause that Philippe received was not simply an expression of excitement over the special feat of dancing between two towers; it was also an expression of gratitude for the rediscovery of the miracle that we can walk together safely on the floor.

This story illustrates how displacement can create a new togetherness. Philippe Petit had to walk on a steel wire to make us see how special it is that we can walk on the floor. The main effect of his being different was to reveal a deeper level of sameness. If we

complain that we are not as capable as this artist and only feel less self-confident because of his feat, we have not understood him; but if we come to recognize through his act that we are all part of the same human family, then his displacement is a real service. The Christians who displace themselves by going to monasteries, foreign lands, or places of great need, do not do such things to be special or praised, but to reveal that what separates us is less important than what unites us. And so displacement is the mysterious way by which a compassionate togetherness is realized.

Seeing Each Other's Unique Gifts

This new, noncompetitive togetherness opens our eyes to each other. Here we touch the beauty of the Christian community. When we give up our desires to be outstanding or different, when we let go of our needs to have our own special niches in life, when our main concern is to be the same, and to live out this sameness in solidarity, we are then able to see each other's unique gifts. Gathered together in common vulnerability, we discover how much we have to give each other. The Christian community is the opposite of a highly uniform group of people whose behavior has been toned down to a common denominator and whose originality has been dulled. On the contrary, the Christian community, gathered in common discipleship, is the place where individual gifts can be called forth and put into service for all. It belongs to the essence of this new togetherness that our unique talents are no longer objects of competition but elements of community, no longer qualities that divide but gifts that unite.

When we have discovered that our sense of self does not depend on our differences and that our self-esteem is based on a love much deeper than the praise that can be acquired by unusual performances, we can see our unique talents as gifts for others. Then,

too, we will notice that the sharing of our gifts does not diminish our own value as persons but enhances it. In community, the particular talents of the individual members become like the little stones that form a great mosaic. The fact that a little gold, blue, or red piece is part of a splendid mosaic makes it not less but more valuable because it contributes to an image much greater than itself. Thus, our dominant feeling toward each other can shift from jealousy to gratitude. With increasing clarity, we can see the beauty in each other and call it forth so that it may become a part of our total life together.

Both sameness and uniqueness can be affirmed in community. When we unmask the illusion that a person is the difference she or he makes, we can come together on the basis of our common human brokenness and our common need for healing. Then we also can come to the marvelous realization that hidden in the ground on which we walk together are the talents that we can offer to each other. Community, as a new way of being together, leads to the discovery or rediscovery of each other's hidden talents and makes us realize our own unique contribution to the common life.

An old Sufi tale about a watermelon hunter offers a fascinating illustration. Once upon a time there was a man who strayed from his own country into the world known as the Land of the Fools. He soon saw a number of people fleeing in terror from a field where they had been trying to reap wheat. "There is a monster in that field," they told him. He looked and saw that it was a watermelon. He offered to kill the "monster" for them. When he had cut the melon from its stalk, he took a slice and began to eat it. The people became even more terrified of him than they had been of the watermelon. They drove him away with pitchforks crying: "He will kill us next, unless we get rid of him." It so happened that at another time another man also strayed into the Land of the Fools, and the same thing started to happen to him. But, in-

stead of offering to help them with the "monster" he agreed with the Fools that it must be dangerous, and by tiptoeing away from it with them he gained their confidence. He spent a long time with them in their houses until he could teach them, little by little, the basic facts which would enable them not only to lose their fear of melons, but even to cultivate them for themselves.¹³

This beautiful tale about obedient service in solidarity well illustrates how compassionate togetherness does not suppress unique talents but calls them forth to fruitfulness. We often think that service means to give something to others, to tell them how to speak, act, or behave; but now it appears that above all else, real, humble service is helping our neighbors discover that they possess great but often hidden talents that can enable them to do even more for us than we can do for them.

Self-Emptying for Others

By revealing the unique gifts of the other, we learn to empty ourselves. Self-emptying does not ask of us to engage ourselves in some form of self-castigation or self-scrutiny, but to pay attention to others in such a way that they begin to recognize their own value.

Paying attention to our brothers and sisters in the human family is far from easy. We tend to be so insecure about our self-worth and so much in need of affirmation that it is very hard not to ask for attention ourselves. Before we are fully aware of it, we are speaking about ourselves, referring to our experiences, telling our stories, or turning the subject of conversation toward our own territory. The familiar sentence, "That reminds me of . . ." is a standard method of shifting attention from the other to ourselves. To pay attention to others with the desire to make them the center and to make their interests our own is a real form of self-emptying, since to be able to receive others into our intimate inner space

we must be empty. That is why listening is so difficult. It means our moving away from the center of attention and inviting others into that space.

From experience we know how healing such an invitation can be. When someone listens to us with real concentration and expresses sincere care for our struggles and our pains, we feel that something very deep is happening to us. Slowly, fears melt away, tensions dissolve, anxieties retreat, and we discover that we carry within us something we can trust and offer as a gift to others. The simple experience of being valuable and important to someone else has a tremendous recreative power.

If we have been given such an experience, we have received a precious kind of knowledge. We have learned the true significance of Paul's words, "Always consider the other person to be better than yourself" (Ph 2:3). This is not an invitation to false humility or to the denial of our own value, but it is a call to enter Christ's healing ministry. Every time we pay attention we become emptier, and the more empty we are the more healing space we can offer. And the more we see others being healed, the more we will be able to understand that it is not through us but through Christ in us that this healing takes place.

Thus, in togetherness we call forth the hidden gifts in each other and receive them in gratitude as valuable contributions to our life in community.

One of the most impressive examples of this compassionate togetherness is a community of handicapped people in Rome. In this community, founded by Don Franco, handicapped adults and children live together in extended families and call forth talents in each other which before had remained hidden. The beauty of their togetherness is so visible and so convincing that many "healthy" people have joined those who are paralyzed, intellectually disabled, blind, spastic, crippled, or deaf and have discovered with them the

great gift of community. In this community, there are few people with self-serving complaints, low self-esteem, or deep depression. Instead, they are people who have discovered each other's distinctive talents and enjoy together the richness of their common life.

This new togetherness is the place of compassion. Where people have entered into the mind of Christ and no longer think of their own interests first, the compassionate Christ is made manifest and a healing presence is given to all.

Gathered by Vocation

By ceasing to make our individual differences a basis of competition and by recognizing these differences as potential contributions to a rich life together, we begin to hear the call to community. In and through Christ, people of different ages and life-styles, from different races and classes, with different languages and educations, can join together and witness to God's compassionate presence in our world. There are many common-interest groups, and most of them seem to exist in order to defend or protect something. Although these groups often fulfill important tasks in our society, the Christian community is of a different nature. When we form a Christian community, we come together not because of similar experiences, knowledge, problems, color, or sex, but because we have been called together by the same God. Only God enables us to cross the many bridges that separate us; only the Lord allows us to recognize each other as members of the same human family, and frees us to pay careful attention to each other. This is why those who are gathered together in community are witnesses to the compassionate God. By the way they are able to carry each other's burdens and share each other's joys, they testify to God's presence in our world.

Life in community is a response to a vocation. The word *vocation* comes from the Latin *vocare*, which means "to call." God calls us

together into one people fashioned in the image of Christ. It is by Christ's vocation that we are gathered. Here we need to distinguish carefully between vocation and career. In a world that puts such emphasis on success, our concern for a career constantly tends to make us deaf to our vocation. When we are seduced into believing that our career is what counts, we can no longer hear the voice that calls us together; we become so preoccupied with our own plans, projects, or promotions that we push everyone away who prevents us from achieving our goals. Career and vocation are not mutually exclusive. In fact, our vocation might require us to pursue a certain career. Many people have become excellent doctors, lawyers, technicians, and scientists in response to God's call heard in the community. Quite often, our vocation becomes visible in a specific job, task, or endeavor. But our vocation can never be reduced to these activities. As soon as we think that our careers *are* our vocation, we are in danger of returning to the ordinary and proper places governed by human competition and of using our talents more to separate ourselves from others than to unite ourselves with them in a common life. A career disconnected from a vocation divides; a career that expresses obedience to our vocation is the concrete way of making our unique talents available to the community. Therefore, it is not our careers, but our vocation, that should guide our lives.

The following story about an American family offers a good insight into the difference between a vocation and a career. John, Mary, and their children enjoyed a very ordinary and proper life in a suburb of Washington, D.C. John was a successful researcher in community development. He gave workshops, taught at the university, and produced regular reports like any other good researcher. Mary was a creative woman who worked with pottery and weaving. Their children were open and friendly toward the neighbors. All who knew the family respected them as caring people, good citizens, and committed Christians. Yet, in the midst of

all their successes, life seemed to lack a dimension that was difficult to articulate. One evening, when John had come home from a lecture he had just given on community, he suddenly realized that his own family was as alienated as most others. The more he thought about it, the more it struck him that he earned his money by speaking about ideals he himself did not realize. He felt like a preacher proudly speaking about humility, angrily pronouncing peace, and sadly proclaiming joy.

When the contrast between his successful career and his unsuccessful life became too obvious to deny any longer, John and Mary took the courageous step of taking their whole family on a one-year retreat during which they lived with very little money, social security, and "success." And there, away from their ordinary and proper place, they discovered life anew. They saw nature as they never had seen it before; they listened to each other as they had never listened before; they prayed as they had never prayed before; and they wondered why it had taken them so long to see what had always been right before their eyes. In this new situation, they began to hear more clearly the call inviting them to live free from the compulsions of the world, but close to each other and their neighbors, and in continually searching for a deeper understanding of the mysteries of life. Here they discovered their vocation, a vocation which had always been there, but which they had not been able to hear before because of the noisy demands of their successful careers.

One of the most remarkable, and in fact unexpected, results of their "conversion" was that, when their vocation reemerged and moved to the center of their attention their whole world became transformed. Words such as *family*, *friendship*, and *love* became new words expressing new experiences of living. Research was no longer an aspect of a competitive academic life, but the expression of the ongoing search for meaning. Leadership became service, an

argument to convince became an invitation to join, and impressive lectures became compelling challenges. Most of all, their new way of being together uncovered in the heart of many other people deeply hidden desires that were never expressed until they were lived out in the concrete life of this American family. What for many had been conceived as only a romantic dream suddenly became real enough to be a reachable goal, an ideal that could be realized. The compassionate life was no longer a fantasy but a visible reality in the vital community of people who had discovered, through displacement, a new way of being together.

A vocation is not the exclusive privilege of monks, priests, religious sisters, or a few heroic laypersons. God calls everyone who is listening; there is no individual or group for whom God's call is reserved. But to be effective, a call must be heard, and to hear it we must continually discern our vocation amidst the escalating demands of our career.

Thus, we see how voluntary displacement leads to a new togetherness in which we can recognize our sameness in common vulnerability, discover our unique talents as gifts for the upbuilding of the community, and listen to God's call, which continually summons us to a vocation far beyond the aspirations of our career.