

Living with ... one's difficulty Setbacks of communication

Br. Paul Griéger

The ideal of a successful relationship, as we have seen (Lasalliana n° 50), is based first and foremost on an idea of "reciprocity"; meaning that one can speak of success only if each of the two speakers (in the simplest case) has an impression of success.

Experience in daily life teaches us how delicate this interpersonal relationship is, how difficult it is to make oneself understood, to understand others precisely; and the more intimate and personal what we want to say, the more we seem to be misunderstood.

There is a pedagogical conclusion that arises immediately from our prior reflections: by wanting to treat man only as a spiritual being without taking account of opposition, he is tyrannised and his nature violated. Interpersonal relationships would be perfect if men were pure spirits, entirely transparent to themselves and others. Each one of us contains a dark and silent area; we no more know ourselves completely than we know others fully.

The experiential method (considering real-life) may help us to "explain" the failures in communication, the misunderstandings, the misinterpretations, and to formulate the possibilities of psycho-pedagogical and pastoral help.

1. The experience of failure in individual communication

A preliminary question arises immediately: would not language, a social fact, be "beyond words" incapable of communicating a person's real-life? Words, in fact, do not necessarily have the same meaning for those who are speaking.

R. Mucchielli makes precisely this remark "People speak to one another a great deal, but understand one another very little" (op. cit. p. 5). He adds: "They undoubtedly recognise quite quickly that they do not share the same opinions, and being unable to convince one another, they remain in their respective positions. It is not so easy to make them admit that they are not giving the words an identical meaning. There is nothing stronger than the illusion that by opening one's mouth one will be understood by others".

Under the thin superficial layer which is necessary and sufficient for everyday verbal exchange between people, each one of us hides, more or less well, a private, emotional world, giving special meaning to his existence; a so-called interior world which is not communicated to any other. Each one is alone because of this "depth".

The well-known French poet, Charles Baudelaire, makes this astonishing reflection. "We progress only by misunderstanding. It is by universal misunderstanding that everyone is in agreement; because if by mischance, people understood one another, they would never agree" (id. Op. Cit. P. 5).

By that he meant that the agreement necessary to social life is based on a superficial understanding which hides the fundamental difference of real-life and personal experience. Absolute understanding is not socially useful for working together, on the contrary...

Baudelaire's reflection leads us into this line. In fact the poet, and the artist in general, the creator, must feel more than any other the distance between what they want to express and what others understand. In the extreme, the breakdown of contact emerges in autism, that is to say in the morbid inability to communicate with another, withdrawing in on oneself, with imperviousness of the self.

Misunderstanding is another form of the difficulty of communication. It is a gap between the "real" meaning (what the transmitter wishes to convey) and the meaning given to this message by the receiver. The receiver has understood "something different" or "approximate".

Misunderstanding has different forms: either it is another meaning given to a keyword; or it is a shifting of the main point on to a word or a group of words other than what was intended by the transmitter; or the loss of a significant context which changes the meaning of what has been wrongly isolated; or the "discovery" between the lines or among the words, of a meaning which the transmitter had not put there.

While each of these forms might be more or less "made easy" by the faults of the transmitter (for example, double meaning, lacunae, silences, etc.), it must also be admitted that the more entrenched is the receiver in his personal system of opinions, ideas or passions, the more chronic is his misunderstanding. When the two speakers are each prisoner of his different system, they are said "not to speak the same language".

It also happens that linked together for other reasons (enforced coexistence, inevitable rivalry), the two colleagues cause the two systems to clash, unceasingly and without any outcome other than violent. For the detached observer it is a "dialogue of the deaf".

2. The pressure of conformity (Setbacks of collective communication)

Community life, as a "primary group", exerts a pressure of conformity on its members. Two factors constitute the pressure of conformity: the need for approval and the need for certainty.

These two factors are seen in the reality of daily life as two varieties of influence on the members of the group: the pressure known as "normative" which acts on the conduct of each in the sense of a conformity to the group standards, as also to the attitudes of the others.

In the second place, the pressure known as "informational" which tends to have information passing as true, accepted as true (worthy of trust), when there are no other criteria of objectivity.

When new, original, unusual ideas are put forward by members of such a group in these conditions, they either meet the pressure of conformity as a group resistance, which is discouraging for the innovator, or as a brake preventing him from putting his propositions for fear of being rejected or mocked by the group... Here are a few concrete examples, which are more frequent in our communities of the present day.

1° A newcomer (in community): a newcomer is regarded as a "stranger" introduced into the group, aspiring (or called) to become part of it. The group, as a living organism, has to "assimilate" the newcomer. As for our problem (one of communication) there are two kinds of reaction to consider: the reactions of the newcomer and the reactions of the group.

The newcomer with regard to the group: he has personal attitudes which vary according to the conditions of his arrival - for example a member who arrives in the middle of the year; a newcomer responsible for an important department, his character, his degree of "openness" or of flexibility, his attitudes regarding his future, etc.

The group with regard to the "newcomer". The reactions at the outset are determined by the conditions upon the newcomer's arrival (expected or imposed, and in this case, why), by the rumours about him. The subsequent reactions are determined by the very person of the newcomer and his "responses" to his direct approach to the task by behaviour which is normally discreet and sometimes devious.

The final reaction brings about his "incorporation" or his "rejection". Rejection takes the form of a collective reaction of hostility. The one rejected is the group's scapegoat or whipping boy.

2° The dissenter and the opponent. A "margin of tolerance to dissent", that is to say tolerable differences of conduct from the norms and models of the group, exists in every group. The "dissenter" does not conform. He "distances" himself from the group and acts by his own standards of personal conduct or those borrowed from another group, or those which are quite simply irregular.

The reactions of the group depend on the degree of dissent with regard to the tolerable margin; on the personal status of the dissenter before he is recognised as such; on the risks which the dissenter poses for the group.

The opponent is first of all the object of pressure by the others to conform, when he reaches the limits of tolerance of difference... This pressure can take several forms, but is essentially affective; that is why the argument of solidarity is always latent. It is the test of belonging, the ultimate testing of loyalty to the group.

3° The "marginal" and the "solitary". Here the spatial metaphor (outside of) translates the moral distance of the subject (his opinions and strengths) with regard to the opinions and standards of the group; but also corresponds to real reactions: the marginal remains "on the fringe" of his group. He refuses to share in this group for different reasons: (non-acceptance, not appropriate use). Through that, marginality is the outer limit of dissent and a sign of rupture.

Isolation, in particular, is characterised by the tendency to cut oneself off from all solidarity with his social group, to develop excessively the worth and rights of the individual (individualism).

In ending this paper, there are two points to stress (for our reflection): on the one hand, the necessity of understanding collective reactions with regard to a context which is apparently "exterior" but determining the existence of the group, its reactions, and a part of its "interior" reactions.

3. Psycho-pedagogical and pastoral help

It is important to make clear that it concerns help for the personality and for the group. So that there may be integration and normal living in a social group, self-control demands a certain psycho-affective maturity, a continuous control of the emotions and passions, a spiritual conversion, a solid education in values.

a) Psycho-affective and cerebral control. The importance of feelings in community life deserves to be stressed. Feelings hold us enmeshed in life and with our neighbour. They are a means of communication and understanding all the more effective when they do not descend into sentimentality and when they evolve. They

allow us to keep a balance in our own psychological life and to surpass ourselves by their self-control and their refinement. When positive, they are the supports of thought and action... The charm of existence comes from them. The stress that was traditionally laid on reason and intelligence is fulfilled by an existential stress in expressing one's feelings adequately. The balance between the repression and expression of feelings is a delicate and on-going question. So cerebral control becomes important. This is normal when each idea, impression or sensation, can be controlled by reason, judgement, will. In other words they can be changed or rejected.

When the conscious me stops having sufficient control of the subconscious me, the will loses direction of the psycho-affective world... Without sufficient control, the individual is constantly passing from a normal state to an unstable, unhealthy state, without any plausible reason. The symptoms appear and disappear at more or less frequent intervals, with depression succeeding happiness. Everything is subject to change, whether health, character or ideas.

Talking to a psychologist or a spiritual Director is an excellent way of lifting the oppressive weight. Another good, practical and simple way, is to establish good relationships with those around one.

Necessity of a recurring control: an essential process in interpersonal communication. Control ensures the worth of effective work, the satisfaction of the receiver and the good reciprocal opinion of colleagues; but it is time consuming. One of the usual forms of this control (feed-back), is the final questioning on the part of the transmitter and the answer of the receiver. The aim of this process, therefore, consists in checking reception or more precisely, the adequacy between what the transmitter has said and what was registered by the receiver.

b) Simple therapeutic help: discussion with the subject who seeks therapeutic help. The practitioner forms a relationship with his client which is both professional and personal. It transforms the existential situation of the subject: the latter is no longer alone. From the interpersonal relationship he draws hope and strength to overcome his problems.

This fundamental process has several positive effects: it establishes and strengthens the interpersonal link which is already therapeutic. It allows the psychologist to understand what is happening for his client and to reflect on it. It forces the subject to react, to express what he is feeling, to conceptualise his life in order to communicate it to the psychologist. It neutralises the social and internal defences of the me, which leads to accepting it as much as it is accepted by the practitioner, from which there flows a relief of the turmoil, the springboard of a new blossoming of the initiative of the me.

In this restitution of full potential of being, the ontological freedom of action, to the me, we have recalled the recourse to the different psychological and therapeutic means. It is necessary to add that there is also recourse to supernatural means: the sacraments, in particular, constitute a powerful aid to improving the psycho-affective harmony of an individual.

Brief bibliography

Communication et Réseaux de communication, R. Mucchielli, EME, Paris.
La destinée personnelle dialogale, Claretianum, Roma.
Pédagogie de la communication, R. Ball, P.U.F. Paris.
Alle origini del pregiudizio: "L'altro vale zero", Psico, Giunti, 134. •