Mr. John J. DeGioia shares his insights

The culture of encounter as an antidote to division

By Valerio Palombaro

The conflict in Ukraine highlights yet again that war is a rejection of encounter. How can the Church and the Catholic community work to change this tendency to reject dialogue and instead promote a form of governance that is focused on the common good?

The current violence in Ukraine highlights the urgency and the imperative of developing and deepening the culture of encounter. The Holy Father in Fratelli Tanti and in Evangelii Gaudium and in other works develops the concept of a culture of encounter that goes back more than two decades to work he led as archbishop in Argentina. The idea is a powerful one. The imperative now is for us to develop these capacities to engage with and mutually recognize one another. When we encounter one another, we are able to see the depth, the uniqueness, and the humanity of the other.

We have many recent successes in dialogue, especially interreligious dialogue, but the consequences of our failure to encounter one another are global—and as we’ve seen in these last few years, quite catastrophic. So it requires new skills in discourse, even a new vocabulary. Encounter is about recognizing the responsibilities we have to one another and seeing things from the other’s perspective.

Where do you see good examples of encounter and dialogue? How can digital technology be used to strengthen rather than damage a real possibility for encounter today?

Over the last roughly 60 years, we have seen great opportunities for interreligious encounter. We’ve seen deep Christian-Jewish dialogue, Muslim-Christian dialogue, and trilateral efforts. At Georgetown University, the oldest Catholic university in the United States, founded in 1878, we have a Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. We have a Center for Jewish Civilization. We have the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs. We sponsor Building Bridges, one of the most important Muslim-Christian dialogues, originally a project of the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. We were the first university in the United States to have a full-time Imam for nearly sixty years. We have a full-time leader for our Dharmic community as well as a Protestant and an Orthodox minister.

In interreligious and other settings digital technologies can either be used to enrich the capacity for encounter or to undermine it. We want to show that both interreligious understanding and new digital technology can be resources to strengthen a new model for encounter. Fratelli Tanti offers us some ways of thinking about what that new model could look like.

Is the conference this week in Rome part of a larger project on the culture of encounter?

The conference is part of a series that we are honored to be cosponsoring with La Civiltà Cattolica. Pope Francis sent a public letter to me and Father Spadaro last October encouraging this collaboration. The first conference last November focused on the culture of encounter and interreligious dialogue, while this one is dedicated to global challenges, including climate change. Since 1945 we have traditionally looked at the global order through the lens of bipolarity. A logic of nuclear deterrence developed that has persisted into our more multipolar world. We have tried to make sense of international armed interventions by justifying them morally through the lens of the “just war” theory. These elements of the global order need to be reevaluated in our current context.
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There’s a balance between the individual freedoms that each one of us has and the responsibilities we have to protect our children. For more than a decade now, since the tragedy at Sandy Hook, and with now the tragedy in Texas, we cannot be satisfied with the ways in which we are protecting our children. Nothing should have greater priority.