



FROM THE 2020 NEW YEARS RETREAT

Becoming TOGETHER

LECTURE 2

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Aristotle said:

"Birds of a feather flock together."

In a way, this is a **natural social phenomenon**. People are more comfortable with people who are like them. You **don't need to explain** to them. They know what you are thinking, how you feel, and what you are going through. They have similar culture, similar experiences, similar ideologies and beliefs. But if this is too much emphasized, you will see **racism, sexism, ageism**, and so on. Then there are people who feel **included** and people who feel **excluded**.

But as we have examined yesterday, we are here together because we have been **called by God**. This is a community God formed. We didn't create this community **by our choice**. We don't control who should come and who shouldn't come. We cannot say that you are not a part of this.






St. Paul explained the church in this way.

**“THE EYE CANNOT SAY TO THE HAND, ‘I HAVE NO NEED OF YOU’, NOR AGAIN THE HEAD TO THE FEET, ‘I HAVE NO NEED OF YOU.’ ON THE CONTRARY, THE MEMBERS OF THE BODY THAT SEEM TO BE WEAKER ARE INDISPENSABLE, AND THOSE MEMBERS OF THE BODY THAT WE THINK LESS HONOURABLE WE CLOTHE WITH GREATER HONOUR, AND OUR LESS RESPECTABLE MEMBERS ARE TREATED WITH GREATER RESPECT.”
(1 CORINTHIANS 12:21-23)**

This is a **very different image** from the image of “birds of a feather flock together.”

Why are we more comfortable who are like us? Because they **affirm who we are**. But people who are different from us, our thoughts, and our beliefs, **make us feel insecure**. They create **anxiety and fear**.





German theologian Jurgen Moltmann said that a spiritual community should **accept one another** as Jesus accepted us. That was what St. Paul said in his letter to the Romans. *"Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."* (Romans 15:7)

Then Moltmann explained how Jesus welcomed us. He said, *"God suffers because of us, for he wants to suffer us."* **Suffer us** – A very interesting expression. And he said, *"Can we suffer those who are different from us?"* This is very different from "Birds of a feather flock together."

What do you mean – God suffers us? Or we suffer those who are different from us?

DISCUSSION

1. St. Paul said we should welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us. What does this mean?
2. To do this, what attitude is needed?



To accept those who are different from us, we need to be **willing to suffer**. Building a community is very much to do with the discipleship. Jesus said, to follow me, you have to **deny yourself and take up the cross** and follow me. Accepting those who are different from us is not to affirm us. Jesus said to deny us. The more you try to affirm you, the more the community will suffer. The more you try to deny yourself and think of others first, the more the community will thrive.

We need to suffer each other. We are connected not just because we feel good to be with. We are connected because God called us and we need the attitude of suffering each other. So, in the spiritual community, you are **not always looking for this good feeling**.

Jesus accepted us and welcomed us **not because we are like him**.

We are so different from him. We are not his kind. **We are his problems and his headache**. And yet he suffered us. It is **his love that welcomed us**. Love is not always **good feeling**. We need to accept each other in the same way.

This is the **key** in building a spiritual community. The gathering of people whom we like and with whom we are comfortable – we cannot say that it is a spiritual community. We need to **accept those who criticize us and make our life difficult**. There are all kinds of people in this community. Some we like, but others we may not like very much. Also, we **meet a lot of people with baggage and issues**. We are all sinners. We are not saints. That's why we cannot naturally accept each other. We need a spiritual discipline to accept each other.

A spiritual community is not to affirm ourselves.



Moltmann said, "We no longer feel that we are made insecure by others because we no longer need self-confirmation. The person who is different **becomes for us**, precisely because of their difference, a surprise which we gladly accept."

In the spiritual community, we **celebrate our differences** as God's gifts. People who are different do not become excluded, isolated, and rejected. They are accepted, included, and honoured.

That's why the spiritual community **cannot be formed by our feeling**, our by our **human influence**, and **natural common sense**. It is hard to form a spiritual community and it requires suffering and sacrifice on our part.

There is a person who started the L'Arche community. L'Arche community began in 1964 in France by a Canadian, **Jean Vanier**. It is a community for developmental disabilities. Henri Nouwen worked here in Richmond Hill, L'Arche Daybreak. He said to the person whom he took care of. I taught at Harvard and wrote these books. He had no idea of what Harvard was or what professors did.

Jean Vanier said, **when we are alone**, we think we can love all people. But when **we enter into a community**, we realize how little love we have. We encounter our own weaknesses, problems, darkness, and lovelessness. We discover our **monster** within us, he said.



He is right. The community often reveals and **exposes not our beauty but our ugliness.** The community is **not a utopia.** The illusion of thinking the spiritual community as utopia is a stumbling block to forming a spiritual community. When we have that **illusion**, we get disappointed because our expectations will not be met. We get hurt.

The **churches St. Paul started** and served were not utopia. There were many problems. Maybe more problems than ours. Thankfully, because of those problems, we have such insightful and beautiful letters of his. The spiritual community is **neither heaven nor hell.** It is simply our reality.

When the illusion of utopia is shattered, the real spiritual community can be formed. Without imposing our expectations to each other, we can work on accepting each other **with all their problems and shortcomings.**

There will always be **people who are too weak to have courage to accept their problems and blame others.** We should accept **even their self-righteous attitude.**

Since, all our problems are exposed, there is always **tension** in the community. There will be misunderstandings, **conflicts, jealousy, and even hatred.** When the tensions are heightened, superficial peace and security will be shattered. These tensions will be always there. And sometimes **we need these tensions to go deeper.** But we have to be careful with these tensions. Otherwise they can break our relationships.

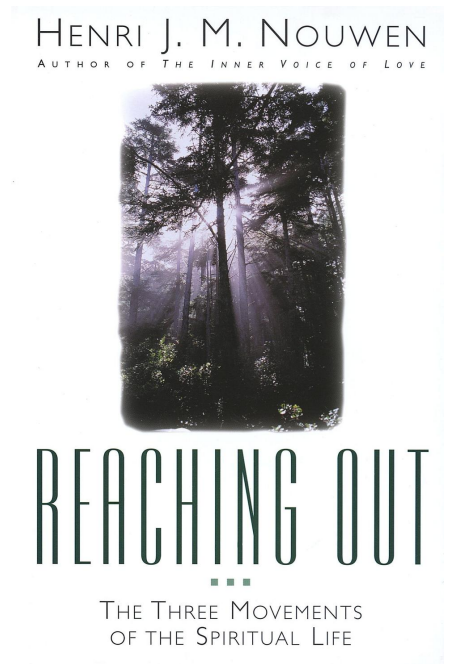
Jean Vanier said, *"Tensions may arise from the fact that some people are too set in their opinions. With time, these people become more open and discover that reality has others dimensions. That is why we have to be patient with tensions and not always seek a speedy resolution."* We can see this very well in Paul's community.

Paul's message was very hard to accept. To Jewish people, saying that you don't need circumcision to be God's people was very difficult to accept. But Jewish people responded to Paul's message with hostility. That's why many people got hurt. Paul had a problem not with Romans or Greeks but with his own people.

Henri Nouwen wrote this small book, called **“Reaching Out.”** In the book, he talks about the examples of hospitality in the Bible. First there is Abraham and the 3 strangers. Then the Widow at Zarephath and the two disciples on the way to Emmaus. He said, people are looking for **hospitable place**, a **safe place**, a place of being welcomed. Then he said what we Christians should do is to create a **movement from hostility to hospitality**, from stranger to friend. From alienation and estrangement to connection.

He said, *“hospitality is not to change people, but to **offer them space where change can take place.**”* This is a very mature attitude. We treat each other not like children, trying to teach them and convince them. But we treat each other like adults, respecting each other’s opinions and creating a safe environment where change can happen.

He gives this image of **inviting a stranger to your house.** *“When we say, ‘You can be my guest if you believe what I believe, think the way I think and behave as I do,’ we offer love under a condition or for a price.”* We cannot call this true love.



DISCUSSION

1. To change hostility into hospitality, what do we need to do?



As I said, the spiritual community is formed by God not by us. We have not chosen who should be members of this church. So, all kinds of people will come. In this community, we will see our own weaknesses, shortcomings, and our own darkness and demons, but we experience God's love and with confidence we try to work out our problems. That kind of safe place – that is what community is.

We let go of the attitude of self-justification and accept each other with humility. Before making judgment of others' faults too fast, we wait, we allow them to work out their problems, and accept them with love. Instead of cutting each other with our words, we use our words to honor them and let them experience how valuable they are. We always treat each other with kindness and gentleness.

I said three things:

1. Put a smile on your face.
2. Be mindful of what we say.
3. Let us always be kind.

Jean Vanier said, *"A relationship is only authentic and stable when it is founded on the acceptance of weakness, on forgiveness, and on the hope of growth."* That is what we need.

We will reflect on "Becoming Together" throughout the whole year. We will study together. And we will pray too. May God's grace be with you as you move from hostility to hospitality, from being isolated to being connected.

Let us help each other. Let us lift up each other's dignity. Let us treat each other with respect and honour. Let us accept each other as Christ accepted us.

Let us discipline ourselves of receiving God's love daily. Let us recognize **how beautiful I am every day.** Let us understand **how important I am to God.** And let us realize **how important people are to me.**

As we work on the spiritual discipline of experiencing God's love, becoming together will happen as the result.