

NEW FRONTIERS

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For twenty years now our frontier has been the Barrio Popular that is on the north eastern edge of Medellín Antioquia: It is the most densely populated suburb of the city; where 60 per cent of the inhabitants are under the age of 30 and where newcomers arrive every day; some displaced from rural areas and others as part of the movement between the cities in the search for better living conditions. For many the name itself implies danger, fear, loss, poverty. It is an area known for its violence and discrimination. It was for this reason that we assumed responsibility for the Fe and Alegria school in the hope that this reality could be changed through Christian education.

A public school located in a remote corner of the city and which can be reached only after a 30 minute climb up very narrow streets is a challenge for any social worker. The houses were built without planning because they were part of a process of invasion on this side of the mountain and any empty space was taken on which to set up a shack made of metal and cardboard. This makes everybody a neighbour and all bring what they can to help another but it also causes problems and difficulties in daily relationships. The consequences of being on a border zone are a daily experience and peace flutters with the fragility of a moth as it nears the heat of a flame.

When you arrive in this place and are faced with this reality there are only two options available: one is to return on the pretext of maintaining your sanity, the other is to become sanely mad or madly sane as Paulo Freire would say. You stay but not with indifference; the risk must be accepted, a matter of getting involved, being part of this reality but doing so in the desire to get to know it better in order to do something that is authorised and also within your possibilities.

We are speaking of frontiers but we are referring not only to physical space, to the lines that determine the end of one territory and the beginning of the next. Historically, frontiers have been areas of confrontation, of the affirmation of power, of the recognition of both similarities and differences, a recognition that hardens every day, Here the centre of reflexion is to be found in the confusion of values and the nature of the relationships already established in these places:

competition and collaboration, union and segregation conflicting relationships and neighbourly gestures; these spaces can be recognised, the stories defined so that this territory becomes an inhabited space where the actors anchor their memories and experiences. Importance is given to the consequences and the frontiers become actual areas of conflict and are the origins of a diffused violence that in its turn generates poverty and feeling uprooted, but which also motivates the creation of previously unimaginable forms of survival. The word “barrio” evokes not only limits; oppression, fear, anxiety, menace but also daring to take risks, hope, strength, liberty, creativity, resilience, forgiveness, community, team work and faith, much faith in oneself, in others and in God, in this order. Moreover it becomes a challenge that stimulates the capacity to think, feel and act with others. Here the frontier is the place where one learns to look at reality in terms of Gospel, in terms of charism, one looks at Jesus of Nazareth and glimpses on the horizon the figure of Claudine.

Who can better exemplify the concept of frontier than Jesus? Sent by the Father on a mission to the end of everything, born on the outskirts of Bethlehem, he transgresses all the laws in order to reach the outcasts and to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God to the poor, the marginalised and rejected, and to set it up through forgiveness and liberating miracles, gestures full of hope and loving hugs and tears before the body of a dead friend. In the end, He dies on the outskirts of the city. What better symbol of a frontier than the cross, which has always been a scandal, but in which is hidden far more than the history of Christianity has been able to perceive until now. For this reason, to live on the frontiers is impossible unless one truly believes, thinks and feels that God is there, and that not all suffering is an evil that has to be eliminated but rather a reality that must be willingly embraced. There is more to it: the God who lives here is not omnipotent, it is impossible to love such a God, but here He is a humble God who can be touched, embraced and served.

And what can be said of Claudine? She was deeply affected by the social injustices in the France of her time and suffered, on the frontier, in her own family (1790) but did not allow herself to be paralyzed by fear. Her profound awareness of the goodness of God led her to search for creative ways to alleviate suffering and transform her surroundings. She did not pause to consider the difficulties or the details of her undertaking. She believed in the seeds of goodness that lie in the heart of every human being, in spite of the cruelties committed. Her exquisite sensitivity made her compassionate and enabled her to recognise the development of goodness in every person, something which called fort within her the energy that enabled her to think up humanising projects and put them into into practice. She collaborated with others and provided a home and family for those without one, taught them skills that would enable them to

earn a living and thus show them the face of God, convinced as she was that the source of evil is the ignorance of God. She was a practical woman but who also relied on Providence in which she believed and in which God does not fail us. And, as if it were of no importance, she left the security of her home, a comfortable nest, the company of her mother, for the frontier of Pierres Plantées, not because she thought it would be easy or would not involve sufferings she herself said, on remembering the night of the 5th – 6th October 1818, “ I seemed to have set out on a mad and presumptuous undertaking.”

To live on the frontiers when other choices are available is madness, a revolution. But it is also here that we understand that we participate in the same charismatic grace as our Foundress. (C 4): On the mission of Fe y Alegria, with the same flame that burned in the heart of Claudine Thevenet and that today, after 200 years continues to burn in the hearts of her daughters

The weeds of conformity and resignation are being uprooted; hundreds of young people today are creating different realities and have transformed both their lives and their surroundings. Here where it seemed that nothing could be changed and where for five or six years there was no legitimate authority and the only future available which children and young people could look forward to was joining one of the gangs, can now experience another way of life and follow courses in leadership, culture and community action that prepare candidates to be representatives in the municipal administration as councillors, coaches for sports teams of children and young people. The State is now present in the establishing of Health Centres and the drawing up of budgets for the different zones. Young people prepare for higher education and now the possibility of professional and technical careers exists with the right to scholarships or to payment in the form of community service.

Nevertheless, the needs remain and work has to be done and it is not easy; there are still illegal activities that form part of a chain and require dialogue and facing up to the reality with those who decide that to steal in their own area is a crime but is justified in another more wealthy zone; to denounce before the courts parents who abuse their children either sexually or physically; to raise the awareness of families in order to help them to work together to protest against the violation of their basic rights; to show young men and girls the evil and real purpose of seductive photographs ; to inform the competent authorities about places where drugs are sold and help women to be more aware of their all important role in the family and of their right to be

loved and protected by their partners; to oblige parents to register their children in school and not send them out to work or to beg.

All this is not easily acceptable to everyone; we know that being involved in the complexities of the human condition involves walking on soft ground and in order to do so we must make a conscious preparation. We must get to know the individual, the group, the frailty, the emotion and the contradictions within the situation and the permanence of all that is human. It is here that the figure of Claudine is at its clearest, we learn from her that Christ is to be encountered in our neighbour and that we must stand barefoot before him in order not to do him any harm. To say all this in other words, it is often a matter of touching wounds; in order to heal and not to enlarge. We have to take into consideration the emotional signification of things, situations, experiences and relationships and enhance these so that they do not remain as part of the previous story, or even of the situation itself but rather find their meaning in life itself.

In any case, neighbourly relationships and mutual help are of fundamental importance for the solidity of progress and development but not in terms of material and physical growth but rather in individual and collective well being; for a society is not unhealthy because it contains many problems and conflicts but because it is unable to make use of the means to manage and overcome them.

Practical exercises

Some suggestions for further study of “ETHICAL PROBLEMS”:

An ethical dilemma is a brief presentation, in story form, of a really possible situation involving a moral conflict and the listeners are asked to suggest either a reasonable solution of the problem or an analysis of the solution proposed by the main protagonist.

Among the objectives of this study of moral dilemmas are the following;

- To get to know ones own scale of values and place them in order of importance
- The development of social awareness, that is empathy, which consists in knowing how to put oneself in the place of another person
- To respect the conduct and opinion of other people and to develop tolerance when faced with principles and values contrary to our own.
- To encourage rational dialogue, an exchange of opinions, concerning different points of view.

- To form a moral judgement motivated by the development of a logical explanation that has been applied to the ethical dimension of the proposed solution or action.
- To encourage the development of what is now called emotional intelligence; this integrates reason, feelings and emotions in the solution of a conflict.
- To think about one's own conduct and opinions in order to make a reasoned study of the complexity of human conduct

I. The presentation of human dilemmas

In order to draw up stories of moral dilemmas that can be discussed in groups it is necessary to take into account some suggestions concerning the main elements, types, alternatives and nature.

1.1 Elements

- ✓ The main personality, the subject of the problem must be clearly described, in order to facilitate identification with hi, or her.
- ✓ The circumstances; in order that the ethical judgement be well thought out and there must be a clear description of all the circumstances otherwise the final decision may be wrong if insufficient information is provided.

1.2 The type of dilemma

It is preferable to choose real problems or dilemmas for if it is familiar it is possible that an element of personal experience will contribute to the formation of a good judgement. A greater element of reality will also make it easier to study. Such real problems or dilemmas can be taken from the daily life of the group, from the media, or texts about values.

1.3 Alternatives

All the possible solutions should be drawn up together with information about their legitimacy.

1.4 Nature

The event must be clearly centred on a question of moral values and the need to make a judgement. The dilemma must be presented with questions such as: Is the decision of so and so right? or What would you have done in these circumstances?

2. Three simple examples of ethical dilemmas

1. Are you ready to take risks in order to help another person?

2. You are in the street and you come across a young person who is begging. After a moment of doubt you decide not to give them anything because their appearance suggests that they will spend it in drugs or alcohol. Do we have to give to everybody even when we are not sure that it will be put to good use? In other words do we have to give to everyone or only those who are worthy and in real need?

3. In one area, a group of neighbours have repeatedly complained to the authorities about frequent disturbances and fights in the streets on account of the trafficking of drugs. Tired of the lack of attention that was paid to their demands they decided to form a neighbourhood patrol in order to guarantee their safety, especially at night. A TV channel, having found out that the neighbourhood group was going out to patrol the area, sent four journalists to cover the story. During the evening members of the patrol group attacked some of the traffickers but not one of the journalists did anything to stop them, as they were only there to collect information. A judge, on learning what had happened, denounced the journalists, accusing them of failing to fulfil their obligation, recognised in the Constitution, to assist the victims of violence. In reply the reporters said that they were bound only to carry out their duties as journalists.

Do you agree with the action of the judge?