



Continuing with our series of reflections beginning with the letter 'C', this reflection highlights the fact that no community is without conflict. People may have the illusion that *Our Way into the Future* aims at creating the perfect community where conflict no longer exists. Nothing could be further from the truth. What the new clusters of communities aim to achieve is to create an atmosphere where the inevitable conflicts can be managed and transformed. And all communities are challenged to work through moments of conflict.

Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche communities, maintains that communities need tensions if they are to grow and deepen. In fact, he suggested that when the community feels that they have no tensions, the members begin to avoid really listening to each other. And when people forget to listen one to the other, it takes tensions or conflicts to bring people back to the reality of their helplessness. So, tensions are necessary and conflict is inevitable. The question remains, why does conflict occur and what causes tensions?

### **WHY CONFLICTS AND TENSIONS?**

Again, Vanier offers a useful insight into this. He says that tensions come from the normal reaction within each of us to our own limitations and darkness. When we realise that we are not the perfect person we hoped to be, we struggle with this fact and find it especially difficult when we see others who seem to be managing life more easily. We, therefore, tend to project our inner fragility onto others, seeing in them some of the faults and failures that are, in fact, more present in ourselves. No wonder Jesus encouraged us to take the beam out of our own eyes before we consider dealing with the mote in our neighbours'! (Lk. 6:42)

Vanier also invites us to consider the fact that the more a community deepens, its members become more vulnerable. He says that love makes us weaker because it breaks down the protective armour that we have built around ourselves. When we let go of our protective armour, we become vulnerable. So, conflict emerges as we fight against the fear of vulnerability and hurt. When we feel exposed to our own fragility, the tendency is towards fight or flight.

When we begin to fight we cease listening, and instead attempt to dominate. We attack the other person instead of attempting to understand what is causing the difficulties. Instead of attempting to understand the other person's point of view, we rush to express our ideas in the belief that we are right.

When we flee, we withdraw from others and create a wall of silence and resentment. Community members can go for days and much longer, refusing to speak to each other, and preferring to create distance from the one who we consider the cause of our hurt and resentment.

## HOW CAN CONFLICT AND TENSION BE MANAGED?

How can tensions prove to be a blessing and not an obstacle to growth? In other words, how can community grow and deepen the quality of its life, given that conflict is an inevitable consequence of people from different backgrounds coming together to form community?

The first thing to remember is that growth can be painful, but, as Mandy Gale says, 'Nothing is as painful as staying stuck somewhere you don't belong.' So, we have a choice, and the challenge when conflict arises is to deal with it in a constructive and healing manner. The alternative is to allow resentment and hurt to fester. How then do we manage conflict?

When conflict arises, we are challenged to remain calm. Instead of reacting to the other person, we do well to calm down, reflect a while and pause before responding. By so doing we allow ourselves to seek first to understand the other.

This seeking first to understand involves being willing to become curious and interested in the other's point of view. How often we are tempted to jump in and imagine that we understand what the other person is thinking and feeling, instead of really exploring what they have in mind. By remaining curious we remain open. And when we are curious and open we allow the other person the space to share their feelings and thoughts. In this way the threat of conflict is lessened. The advice from the Book of Proverbs is very relevant: "Let the wise listen and increase their learning" (Proverbs 1:15).

When the space is left for the person to share their point of view we are more liable to be empathic to what they feel. The actress Susan Sarandon says, 'when you start to develop your powers of empathy and imagination, the whole world opens up to you'. By seeking to imagine what the other person is really convinced of and what it must be like to believe what they believe, you begin to see the world through their eyes. Then, the chances are that you can even feel for the other person even when you disagree with their ideas.

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*"Communities need tensions  
if they are to grow and deepen.*

*. . . When everything is going well,  
when the community feels it is living successfully,  
its members tend to let their energies dissipate,  
and to listen less carefully to each other.  
Tensions bring people back to the reality of their helplessness;  
obliging them to spend more time in prayer and dialogue,  
to work patiently to overcome the crisis and refind lost unity;  
making them understand that the community  
is more than just a human reality,  
that it also needs the spirit of God if it is to live and deepen.*

*I am told that there is a Chinese word for 'crisis'  
which means 'opportunity and danger'.  
Every tension, every crisis can become a source of new life  
if we approach it wisely,  
or it can bring death and division."*

*- Jean Vanier, Community and Growth*

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