

Towards a ‘Differentiated Consensus’

Border Crossing to Unexpected Alliances

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Human we were counted once, perhaps,
Or one far-off day we may be so
When we’ve found an answer to these traps;
But, here and now, to call us human? No.

We’re just a name that’s written on a pass,
A dumb reflection in a looking glass,
The echo of what once was finely said,
The rumour of a rumour that’s long dead.

What was human long ago stamped out –
Why should we up the empty show?
In our faceless cities swirled about
Shall we still pretend we’re human? No.

We are the dust that’s blown from lamp to lamp,
The queue that waits for the official stamp,
The number in a bureaucratic file,
And our own shadows could not be more vile.

A poor half-finished sketch is all we are
A glimpse of humans in their finished state,
A tune suggested by the opening bar –
You call us wretches human being? Wait!

Song of the human

Poem by Jura Soyfer; translated by John Lehmann

⁷ Austrian architect and theologian. He started in the late nineties a structured Marxist-Christian dialogue together with Walter Baier and other comrades in Vienna. He is part of the coordination team of DIALOP and a member of the international Focolare Movement.

By 1998, several years had already passed since Karl Rahner's dialogue took place with Marxists such as Roger Garaudy. When there did not appear to be sufficient grounds for Christians to engage with Marxism and communism after the end of the Soviet Union, regular dialogue between the Austrian Communist Party (KPOe) and the Focolare Movement started in Vienna on common themes: the beginning of a journey to an unknown destination.

Nine years later in the spring of 2007, the former leader of the Austrian Communist Party (KPOe), now the coordinator of Transform! Europe – the think tank of the Party of the European Left – summed up his experience in these words, 'We have built a stable foundation of trust. We are open to each other without illusions. [...] An active humanism must always be accompanied by discussing the motivations. Love is undoubtedly the peculiar contribution of Christianity to human coexistence. [...] I, therefore, propose an initiative aspiring to redefine the relationship between Christianity and Marxism. It should focus on answering the question of what we, people gifted with ethics and morality, have in common; we start with a dialogue of life to ensure proximity to reality'⁸. The founder of the Focolare movement, Chiara Lubich, immediately replied calling for 'a redefinition of the relationship between Christianity and Marxism'⁹.

On September 18, 2014, I witnessed the conversation between Pope Francis, the future Greek Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras and Walter Baier. The pontiff declared that war, poverty, the environmental crisis and the resultant migratory flows were issues too serious to be resolved by a single force, including the Catholic Church. He considered transversal dialogue among people of goodwill as the only way forward, crossing the fences of their respective visions of the world.

A joint project was thus launched: DIALOP – a transversal dialogue project. While Baier is the coordinator of transform!europe, the Secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education, Archbishop Vincenzo Zani, was appointed interlocutor by the Vatican. In 2016, the guidelines to regulate the dialogue's conduct were drafted together, followed by three symposia of experts, that culminated in a Christian-Marxist Summer School, 'Europe as a Common – let's think about it', on the Greek island of Sy-

⁸ F. Kronreif et al., Personal communication with C. Lubich, 6. April 2007

⁹ C. Lubich, Personal communication with F. Kronreif et al., 27. April 2007

ros in September 2018. Fifty-four professionals and students from nineteen countries, mostly Europeans, spent a fruitful week together, working successfully towards building bridges among generations, cultures and world views. Rigorous self-criticism of some weak points did not discourage the steering team from considering the possibility of further study and extension of their experience, however.

RESET – an experiment of transversal social ethics

The project is represented by the acronym RESET – which is 'tRansvErsal Social Ethics'. Social ethics has become the obvious focal point of the project. Together with some universities from different European countries as partners, it has been decided to continue addressing the relevant themes with a double approach: the Catholic social doctrine's viewpoint guided by *Laudato Sí* and the neo-Marxist critical social theory of the School of Frankfurt. It should be mentioned that it is not difficult to reach a basic consensus considering the topics; the summary of the 'Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church' is widely shared by the Left. And yet, those in the know come across significant conflicting issues when analyzing the texts.

Nevertheless, the project is gradually beginning to emerge and take shape. In a propaedeutic phase, the Marxist experts will introduce the basic ideas of today's Marxism while Catholic theologians will unveil some basic knowledge of Christianity to non-Christians, followed by a presentation on the specific path of dialogue, which is the soul of the whole project. The question, 'What is man?' will form the prelude to real social ethics. It will not only be addressed during the conferences and discussions by the socialist and Christian experts, but the students are also invited to reflect on it throughout the future two-week summer school. The result will be presented to the European Parliament and published in a new series in English, edited by a German publisher. There will be two approaches to social ethics: the ecological encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* ', and Walter Benjamin's thesis, 'On the Concept of History'.

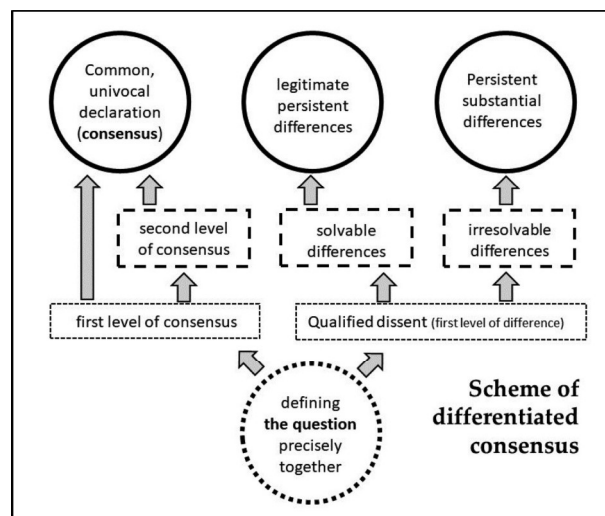
We believe that this dialogue is likely to open unexplored horizons. Drawing inspiration from the *Differentiated Consensus* which formed the basis for the rapprochement of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, making possible the formulation of the *Joint Declaration on*

Justification, signed in Augsburg in 1999, social ethics is also expected to undergo an analogous experiment to achieve a shared transversal social ethics despite completely different conditions. Although we are exploring a completely new realm, the experience made so far gives us reason for hope.

Through dialogue toward ‘differentiated consensus’

The fundamental declarations on ‘humanity, society, world’, formulated unequivocally through the Differentiated Consensus Method, must form a solid basis to allow the partners to speak and act together, at the service of men and women in society. The common fundamental assertions must refer explicitly to authoritative texts in order to be compatible with the respective traditions of the Catholic Church and that of the Left of transform!europe.

How is the project arranged for this experiment?



First of all, it focuses on defining the question with precision. In a dialogical process moreover, the interlocutors’ respective approaches and positions are presented to other partners and received by them with maximum openness. All participants try to see reality through the eyes of the ‘different’ interlocutors. At this point, a process for clarification follows which lasts until each participant understands the vision of the other in depth and

can reproduce it with his or her own words. The search for a common univocal declaration can be initiated from here, reflecting one's own tradition, while being enriched by the other party.

Certainly, there are going to be various types of differences. If significant differences undermine a coherent fundamental declaration they must be clarified until they can fall into a second category, the legitimate divergent interpretations of the joint declaration. These do not endanger the common core, but rather enrich it. Even these *legitimate persistent differences* will be formulated and accepted by both parties.

Furthermore, the points on which a differentiated consensus has not (yet) been possible, will not be hidden. Persistent and substantial differences – the third category – must neither be erased nor simply maintained, in the sense of leaving them unaltered. Instead, these fundamental differences will remain open and considered to be valuable.

Why does RESET apply differentiated consensus?

Truth and reality are both complex and complementary. This has been recognized not only by the discovery of the wave-particle property of quantum physics but also ever since Nicholas of Cusa wrote the *Coincidentia Oppositorum*.

There is a hierarchy of truths; beyond that, there is also a fundamental difficulty in phrasing any expression of truth.

Language – as the house of being (Heidegger) – is a limited human experience therefore, since a linguistic expression rarely portrays reality in its entirety. Mankind looks at the world as though through a window. The position and extent of the view may vary from observer to observer. In addition, the reality can be seen from different angles, and there is finally the background horizon that influences perception. Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI expresses this phenomenon, 'If a man's mind acquires something as it is, then man has found the truth. But only a small part of what is real – not the truth in all its dimensions and as a whole.' (Ratzinger, 2011, p. 215).

The differentiated consensus is meant to connect one's personal horizon with that of others, resulting in its expansion. It yearns to experience unknown perspectives and to integrate the limited vision of a personal linguistic perception of reality with that of others. To arrive at a common statement of the facts in their essence – in which one's own knowledge does not

succumb to an imposition, but is dissolved into a greater knowledge – the explicit will of both the sides is necessary – the will to engage in a dialogue that is kenotic in attitude and transformative in its result.

An in-depth dialogue is kenotic and transformative

Over the years a common path of dialogue has emerged, which has the strength to change people, perceptions and facts. This form of dialogue is not only an instrument but a constant encounter therefore, a journey of common intellectual and spiritual experience in which the peculiarity of the respective partners does not vanish but becomes clearer; it unfolds and develops. In this sense, opposites become complementary. Recognizing this does not necessarily lead to trivial pluralism or indifferent tolerance but to treating the position of the other so that polarity occurs without polarization.

Dialogue thus turns into an existential process in which the participants put their humanity into play. It can be applied to what Jacques Derrida describes with the concept of hospitality. ‘So it is indeed the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage – and who really always has been. And the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the house. The guest becomes the host’s host. The guest (*hôte*) becomes the host (*hôte*) of the host (*hôte*). These substitutions make everyone into everyone else’s hostage.’ (Derrida, 2011, p. 123). Hospitality, therefore, means losing one’s house. Paul pushes this loss to the extreme in the hymn of the letter to the Philippians: Christ ‘loses’ divinity in his kenosis in order to be a man among men.

In earthly conditions therefore, Jesus of Nazareth explains losing and finding in these words, ‘A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.’ (John 13: 34) and ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.’ (John 15: 12-14). There is no surprise for Christians as far as this goes.

Who would think though that a piece of Karl Marx’s early writings could be similar to this? In his Parisian manuscripts of 1844, he writes, ‘Assuming human beings as human beings and their relationship to the world as human beings, you can only exchange love for love, trust only for trust

etc. [. . .] If you love without provoking mutual love, that is, if your loving does not produce Love, if you – by expressing your life as a loving person – do not make yourself a loved one, then your love is powerless, a misfortune' (Marx, 1953, p. 301). Also, in his essay for the school-leaving examination in 1835 Marx writes, 'History calls those men the greatest who have ennobled themselves by working for the common good; experience acclaims as happiest the man who has made the greatest number of people happy. Religion itself teaches us that the ideal being whom all strive to copy sacrificed himself for the sake of mankind, and who would dare to set at nought such judgments?' (Marx, 1953, p. 301).

These words of Jesus and Marx to this point converge in the same direction. John's Gospel indicates the goal to which mutual love leads according to the standard set by Jesus. Addressing the Father, Jesus says, 'The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, . . . ' (John 17: 22f).

This can be linked to what Matthew 18:20 proclaims, 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.' In this verse, the verb '*symphonein*' suggests an agreement – the unity mentioned in the Gospel of John, unity based on mutual love without any conditions. Bishop Klaus Hemmerle writes, 'the communion, unity with one another [rises from here], which creates space for the living Lord to manifest himself and to communicate' (Hemmerle, n.d). The communion created by mutual love is the widest possible access to a vital and palpable encounter with the Risen Lord. But a question arises here: Are even those who do not profess Christ entitled to such a tangible encounter with him? St John Paul II says, 'By dialogue we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God.'¹⁰ For Chiara Lubich, this presence of 'the Risen' opens the possibility for Christ to emerge from the tabernacle and enter the mundane everyday world in a certain sense, as the sacrament of the laity (Lubich, 2019, p. 145). The community becomes a divine place where the mystical presence of the Lord can be experienced therefore. (John Paul II, 1996 quoted by Francis 2018, p. 142)

¹⁰ With reference to his speech to the members of other religions, Madras, 5 February 1986, n. 4: Incisivo IX/1, 1986, S. 322f. English: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_09091998.html

It is a fact that in this atmosphere of encounter with Christ, ample common space is discovered for real or presumed extremes. A '*communio oppositorum*' comes about unexpectedly. The participants are no longer themselves in this dialogue. The presence of Christ brings with him the gifts of the Spirit which renews the face of the earth. From this we hope that the resultant social ethics could draw a temporary, perhaps 'half-finished sketch' (see Jura Soyfer's poem) of the Kingdom for which Christians pray in the Lord's Prayer. At this point the dialogue becomes transformative and performative.

What kind of transformation?

One question still remains unanswered. Why did DIALOP – transversal dialogue project – start as a Christian-Marxian dialogue? I will try to answer this from the Christian point of view.

Marxism is not only one of the various expressions of secularity, but it is also one of the most studied and consistent; it has strongly marked the course of recent history. This is true in spite of its contradictions, deviations and even the atrocities with which it is associated. Similar discrepancies can be attributed to Christianity as well nevertheless. Communism has been one of the most avid opponents to the Catholic Church for more than a century, at least in certain regions of the world. If these two approaches, which seem so divergent, enter into dialogue now, they will open up a vast realm where other approaches will be able to enter afterwards. The need to bridge the – sometimes great – distance between different starting points promotes critical and even self-critical thinking to be able to accept different thoughts without prejudice and precaution.

This transversal social ethic approach is meant to produce a radical transformation that goes to the root of the problems. It does not look for scapegoats on which to load one's fears. Instead of diversionary manoeuvres, this dialogue seeks real solutions, which is why the project also includes (Critical) Service Learning, which overcomes monolithic solutions and starts reflection processes taking the political context into account.

RESET welcomes Pope Francis's message of 12 September 2019, when he launched the educational pact extending an invitation to 'boldly undertake processes of change and look to the future with hope.' We need to find 'other ways of envisioning economics, politics, growth and progress.

In the development of integral ecology, a central place must be given to the value proper to each creature in its relationship to the people and realities surrounding it, as well as a lifestyle that rejects the throw-away culture.' It is hoped that this project will contribute to that educational path which is a precondition for every transformation and underlines what is referred to as universities' third mission: In addition to research and teaching this also includes a commitment to build – with dialogue and with the strength of goodwill – a more just, supportive, fraternal and welcoming society.