My neighbor

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I was born outside this country, this culture, and this language; although seeing myself as citizen of the world and part of the one human race, I wonder if I have any word to say to you who read this in your maternal language and from the richness of your own culture. As you read, please indulge a brother coming from the other America, in the South, ignorant of better words but who has seen death, suffering, violence, and exclusion; someone who has witnessed despair, anguish, and sadness, but also the joy of faith, hope, and love, as a magnificent flower growing in the rotten mud nurtured by the Spirit given by the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus, as a Christian often seen as a foreigner, I have seen that the question for “who is my neighbor?”—which may seem very simple—can be the start point of difficult conversations. However, the question jumps and demands attention as a hunting tiger or as a curious kitty, depending on how we justify our understanding of what we need to do for inheriting eternal life. Covid-19 pandemics has brought others in need and suffering so close to each one of us, that we do not need to see far away to find someone half death. But the close view is not the whole picture. Pandemics has also reminded us that disease touching someone can develop spreading suffering in the other side of the world and end affecting the whole earth. Because humankind is really one family. We already knew that because we see ourselves as children of the same Father. However, in this immense family it has become increasingly easier to forget some of the siblings that we rarely see and who are (almost) never in touch with us. We can sometimes forget those suffering close to us when we are not sharing such suffering conditions, but it is perhaps easier to overlook those many faraway neighbors whose problems and sorrows can be easily ignored for being part of the other side of the world.

Nevertheless, they are also our neighbor. They are important to us for Christian reasons but also for many reasonable motives. U.S. and Northern Hemisphere problems may need solutions that encompass the Global South. The globalization we experience has shortened distances in such a way that we are living in the most multicultural societies known through human history. Despite of being a neglected human right, migration has become global and contributes to diversification as one of the earliest and most constant human behaviors—because people has always looked for places that fitted their subsistence needs as they looked for food or shelter. Therefore, it is undeniable that Southern countries and their cultural richness cannot be ignored in any effort to fully understand contemporary Northern countries diversity.

Nonetheless, most U.S. strategies to solve problems are so U.S.-centered—somehow as centered in us=U.S.—that they do not allow to see out of country boundaries; even more, they do not see out of domestic-born ideas ignoring those perspectives flourishing out of such boundaries. Strategies lack of ability to learn from everywhere they can gain and be enriched, but problems may require exploring solutions rooted in cultural traditions that current Northern societies seem to ignore or have forgotten. An example could be consensual agreements in indigenous communities which go beyond democratic decisions because numeric minorities are never ignored, and majority decisions are never imposed.

The approach to the South is also a learning opportunity. Overcoming the challenge will enlighten domestic approaches to those in disadvantage inside Northern societies. Any approach from a powerful standpoint to those lacking such a power has the risk of turning relationships into colonial conquer and dialogue into cultural colonization. It is not enough to argument that there come from the best wishes and that something is better than nothing. This can be true but still unintended consequences can be harmful.

I remember that I started practicing social work intervention when I was 15 years old. In our school we divided in teams organized to weekly visit and work in a marginal community. I learned from people who didn’t have enough to eat or to dress, or enough space to live in, but who were able to share with us the little that they had with such love and care that they taught me how to be Christian and how to be human. We started developing health community programs, including dog rabies vaccination. There is always lack of medical personnel, so a group of 90 teenagers were trained for 20 minutes—in total—by a nurse. We were practicing using an empty syringe and an orange that each one of us was supposed to bring. Even assuming the best intentions, the needle ended in the wrong place more than once. The result helped to prevent rabies, but besides, you can imagine that the week after the vaccination campaign, there were some dogs unable to properly walk after having been “helped” by our group. It was better than nothing, but it was not good enough.

It happens something similar in some U.S. born initiatives full of love and goodwill but lacking the appropriate strategy. I have seen how amazingly easy is to turn a teaching initiative into an intellectual colonialism enterprise. Starting by language and including the neglection of local perspectives, pastoral training can become the effort of making African or Latin American pastors “in U.S. pastors´ image, according to U.S. pastors´ likeness.” This effort seems to forget the Deuteronomy (Dt 6:4) creed “The Lord our God, the Lord *is* one!”  On the contrary, if Northern born initiatives strive to become Southern born, learning from other richness, they can stop being colonialism to become dialogue, education, evangelization, etc. This humble dialogical disposition will also improve any in-country intervention at marginalized, excluded, or discriminated environments. Dialogue, itself, turns marginalized into center, excluded into included, and discriminated into an equal interlocutor. This is necessary, but not easy. Dialogue-based interaction and intervention requires that the one from outside learns to listen the others and to understand their own language. The initiatives must learn to stop speaking in their power-based language—and to stop speaking to themselves, as sadly happens many times.

My 15-year-old ambiguous intervention story can also show that the South has conditions that go beyond usual Northern experiences and conceptual references. This is not the place for summarizing them but mentioning some examples can help to see the importance of approaching them to figure out global solutions. Whereas people in the North wonder if they should accept a vaccine, People in the South wonder how to have access to the vaccine to stop death. In the South, there are limited resources, limited structures, limited rule of law, but too many needs. There are places with an unbelievable insecurity, where life risk goes beyond Northern horror stories. I have seen an infant who starved to death. I have been in places with no running water—not even clean water—around them. Nevertheless, adjacent to violence and corruption, there is a higher cultural appreciation of family and elders, more respect for religious practices and traditions, and an amazing disposition to help and share. The approach gets more challenging because there are contrasting differences between regions and countries, given that there are areas mostly mirroring the North.

To approach those Southern neighbors, dialogue can be the starting point, but it will require creative ways of summing efforts. Wisdom and experiences as well as resources and strategies from everywhere are called to be integrated. We all have an open path to keep learning and practicing social innovation.

Therefore, I guess that the Christian challenge is acknowledging that the Holy Spirit as the gift of the Father of Jesus Christ makes us all his children, and I cannot be a child of God if I agree on excluding other sisters and brothers from the same table, from safe and healthy life conditions, from dignity, from freedom, etc. I came from the South keeping in mind those needs, and I decided to stay in the U.S. to access better opportunities to approach Latin America and the Global South. So, I am now writing from the North, from security and safety, I am writing from a full stomach and AC climatic office, while having clean water for drinking and clean warm water for a bath. When I am not in need and pain, I tend to forget how pain hurts and how need stresses. Because of that, I pray that all that I do will somehow favor the racially and otherwise discriminated, the colonized destroyed cultures, the abused women, the neglected children, the abandoned elders, … That is, somehow favors all those women and men whose blood also runs in my veins because we are the same family.

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