

Pastor's Column

The Culture of Encounter

Since his election as Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis has, in his various homilies and talks, been using the language of inclusion which he calls “the culture of encounter.”

He described it this way in a homily during one of his morning Masses at the Domus Sanctae Martae:

Doing good is a principle that unites all humanity, beyond the diversity of ideologies and religions and creates the “culture of encounter” that is the foundation of peace...The Lord has redeemed all of us, all of us, with the Blood of Christ: all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone! “Father, the atheists?” Even the atheists. Everyone! And this Blood makes us children of God of the first class! We are created children in the likeness of God and the Blood of Christ has redeemed us all! And we all have a duty to do good. And this commandment for everyone to do good, I think, is a beautiful path towards peace. If we, each doing our own part, if we do good to others, if we meet there, doing good and we go slowly, gently, little by little, we will make that culture of encounter: we need that so much. We must meet each other doing good. “But I don’t believe, Father. I am an atheist!” But do good: we will meet one another there.

Speaking to the Italian Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired in June, he said:

I also wish the best for your association. Spread a culture of encounter, solidarity, and hospitality towards persons with disabilities, not just asking for the proper social services but also encouraging their active participation in society.

At World Youth Day in Brazil in July, Pope Francis gave these remarks:

Promote a culture of encounter. In many places, and in general in this economic humanism that has been imposed throughout the world, the culture of exclusion, a “throwaway culture,” is spreading. There is no place for the elderly or for the unwanted child; there is no time for that poor person in

the street. At times, it seems that for some people, human relations are regulated by two modern “dogmas”: efficiency and pragmatism...have the courage to go against the tide, against this throwaway culture. Let us not reject this gift of God which is the one family of his children. Encountering and welcoming everyone, solidarity—a word which is hidden in our society, as if it were a bad word, solidarity and fraternity: these are what make our society truly human... Be servers of communion and the culture of encounter! And do so without being presumptuous, imposing “our truths.” What must guide us is the humble yet joyful certainty of those who have been found, touched and transformed by the Truth who is Christ, ever to be proclaimed.

What is a “culture of encounter” from the Catholic perspective? One anonymous blogger put it this way in words with which I very much agree:

The culture of encounter is the opposite of the fortress mentality. Instead of being defensive and shying away from others, we engage them where they are at, letting our actions speak for us and observing the others’ actions to learn what good they know.

Encounter is a loaded word because Catholics speak of liturgy, scripture, sacraments, etc., as moments of encounter with Christ. Through these encounters we grow in holiness and grow closer to God.

The implication here is that encounter with non-Catholics, even non-Christians or the irreligious can be of benefit to us. The benefit is not only to us; we see ourselves as leaven in the dough of humanity.

Fr. Mike