Columns
Horizons
Spirituality



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December 30, 2022

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The holidays are a time for slowing down and gathering with loved ones to refuel for another year. These times can also be an amplifier for the state of our relationships, particularly among our inner circles and with family. As we wind down the season and move into a new year, it's a good time to reflect on the relationships in our life.

I've been gifted with many warm acquaintances, circles of loved ones and tight-knit fellowships that have enriched and defined every stage of my life. Nevertheless, I find myself thinking about those relationships that have become strained over the years: some by disagreement, some by challenging circumstances, some by carelessness or neglect. Most have moved beyond the tensions to a deeper place of appreciation and understanding. However, I'm keenly aware of relationships that remain wounded and in need of healing. The closer the relationship, the more it pains me if they are out of whack.

Divisive overtones, ideological hardlines and relentless demands of daily life inevitably impact how we engage with others. We are living in times that offer regular stress tests that can gauge the well-being of our relationships. It is all too easy to cast judgment, to lose patience and disengage, or to shut down with harsh words when disagreements surface or differences become a point of friction.

Sisterly charity as a model

My Dominican congregation has a history of creative fidelity, joyful community, and a can-do, collaborative spirit. It also includes a shadow side of holding differences, disagreements, even divisions. Disputes have no doubt taken hold at various points over our 175-year history. Questions about how to proceed in the face of change or how best to respond to the demands of the times must have caused friction. Much like today, the individual and the communal discernment of the congregation do not always align. No doubt, many sisters have been frustrated or disillusioned, some even chose to leave. Wounded relationships are inevitably part of our story, too. Sisters are only human, after all.

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During an Advent retreat this year, I read the Christmas messages to the congregation from each prioress in our history. The letters gave me a glimpse into

their specific times and concerns, and I pondered the many changes, tribulations, upheavals and uncertainties that the Sinsinawa Dominicans have weathered together. A common thread that stood out was one of "sisterly charity" and the urgency of maintaining it. It strikes me as a model for tending to our personal relationships with family, friends, and peers. How might we apply the idea of charity, "a voluntary giving of help," to strained relationships?

That question has me thinking of the Catholic social justice lobby Network, started by Catholic sisters in 1972. As fewer sisters were available to staff the organization, the leadership hoped to sustain their persuasion among lay staff by articulating Network's Sister Spirit as a formative part of the organizational culture. When disagreements bubble up and tensions develop, co-workers are reminded "to listen with curiosity and humility and to remain open to learning" from the encounter. Sister Spirit calls co-workers to "root their understanding of differences in encounter, not in ideological framing," and to "approach situations and people with hope and welcome."

At face value, these ideas may seem overly simplistic. In fact, Network's anti-racism work highlighted the problematic nature of making this the expectation when unconscious racial bias or microaggressions are at play. Nevertheless, I believe that, at their root, they reflect the sisterly charity mentioned in letters from former prioresses and might offer a roadmap to begin tending to wounded relationships.

Lifelines for wounded relationships

The more intimate the relationship, the more complex and layered the dynamics that cause tension, and they grow more entrenched when left unattended. Estranged family members, for example, can take decades of therapy to regain the level of trust needed to show vulnerability or express love to each other. Many never do. There is a particularly sharp sting, after all, in being misunderstood, treated unkindly or dismissed by peers, loved ones and others in our inner circle. Ideally, these are the very relationships that we look to for support and understanding.

As one of my dear sisters mused in our conversation about how disagreements can impact relationships: "How can we have the courage and love to differ graciously?" Another sister at a recent event marking the close of our congregation's 175th year offered the Most Respectful Interpretation as an approach to sisterly charity. This intentional, voluntary act of goodwill means that I choose to give the benefit of the

doubt to the other person. It doesn't mean I won't attend to my questions later, but it does mean I'll refrain from reacting based on my own assumptions or fears.

Relationships, by nature, take two. How do I share in sisterly charity when it feels like there is no receptiveness? I can't take responsibility for someone else's role in a strained relationship, but I can take responsibility for tending to my own wounds. Unattended wounds and fears projected onto others is a tragic way that we sabotage relationships. I'm aware that there have been times when my own past hurts have caused me to react defensively, to make unfair judgments and to hurt others.

When I pay close attention, I can tell where my heart has hardened and inadvertently contributes to tension. Sisterly charity calls me to be mindful of my own wounds and fears and their role in a relationship. That mindfulness alone is a way of tending to them and helps me to soften. There may never be a grand reconciliation — or agreement or an apology — but the quiet whisper of a kind gesture makes space for healing. The smallest, most insignificant expression of vulnerability or appreciation is the beginning of a softer space to engage. That voluntary offer is a lifeline for a strained relationship.

I recently spoke with a dear friend who has been courageously tending his own wounds while beginning the long process of reconciling with estranged family members. I asked him if he had any suggestions or insights to offer. After some thought, he texted the following approach: patience, remember the good, humility, reach out, repeat.

These are extremely challenging times, and we need one another more than ever. There is also an epidemic of loneliness and isolation despite the ease to reach out and communicate with others. What better time to reconsider the differences, the points of tension, the disagreements and the silences that have distanced us from relationships with loved ones? What is separating us from a friend or a family member (or a sister) — and how important is it, really?