

Management of conflicts within the Church

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To talk about conflicts in the Church is to recognize that there are some, that this is totally natural, because all human groups experience conflicts: **conflicts are part of life!** Denying there are conflicts in the Church, or repressing them, is committing a theological error, which consists of confusing the Church and the Kingdom. We are not yet in the Kingdom, even if we can witness to it and contribute to building it. And, during the “time of the Church” which extends from Pentecost to the return of Christ, the Church is subject to the same sociological difficulties and laws as any other group. Repressing conflicts is also dangerous from a practical point of view, because through “return of the repressed”, they can still prove to be devastating. The Church is perhaps a place that is particularly “conflict producing”, in comparison to groups of the same size, precisely because there is a tendency to deny conflict, but also because we don’t always know how to handle it. Here we are going to look at various methods for managing conflict. I will not go into the traditional methods which are part of the African, Malagasy or Indian Ocean cultures: you can probably enrich us on this subject. I will only talk about methods which have proven useful in Europe, but which undoubtedly have a certain dimension of universality which can make them applicable elsewhere. These methods have been seen to be effective in secular groups, and the Church would be wrong to deprive itself of this know-how, especially since purely secular techniques can very well be “evangelized”: one can clearly adopt an effective secular technique, and accompany it with prayer, meditation, and bible studies. In fact, the Bible shows us that conflicts are ambivalent, and not always negative: the institution of deacons in Acts 6, 1-6 is a good example of this ambivalence.

Before presenting these methods, **we need to ask what a conflict is.** Three notions must be distinguished: disagreement, conflict, and violence. A disagreement is a difference of appreciation concerning some object (time of a worship service, interpretation of a biblical text, a political opinion ...). The criterion for distinguishing a disagreement from a conflict is the balance of power. As soon as relational tension begins, one can speak of a conflict. From the Latin « *confligere* » (= clash, have a collision), the word “conflict” designates a clash, a collision between opposing forces, which can be persons or groups, each one wanting to win out over the other. But there are two types of conflict: conflicts over objects and conflicts between persons. A conflict over an object concerns a clearly defined object (a financial decision, a value such as punctuality, a doctrinal point ...). A conflict of persons begins with an object, but forgets the object in order to attack the person as an adversary, that is, in his integrity and his dignity. A conflict over an object can very rapidly become a conflict between persons. Crossing the boundary between a conflict over an object and a conflict between persons can be identified as the entrance into violence. Violence is the negation of a person’s integrity and dignity, his reduction into something less than a human being, his animalization, his reification or his demonization. Violence is thus vaster than physical violence. It can take four forms: physical, psychological, structural and symbolic. There are thus violent conflicts (conflicts of persons) and conflicts without violence (conflicts over objects). We can trace concentric circles between disagreement, conflict, and violence: any conflict is a disagreement, but all disagreements do not lead to conflict, all violence is due to a conflict but not every conflict is violent. **The golden rule** for the management of conflicts (management that is evangelical and non-violent) will thus be to **bring all conflicts between persons back to being a conflict over an object**, so that we can sit around a table and talk about the object. The leitmotiv will then be: “what is the object?” in order to identify and be able to talk about the object.

In the Church, a certain number of **preventives measures** can make it possible to avoid conflicts: first of all, multiply opportunities for getting to know one another (meetings, meals, sharing, community-wide activities, convivial events...), because many conflicts are fed by ignorance and the fear that we have of each other; then, learn to speak in a manner that will let you be heard (avoiding accusatory expressions, referring to oneself, one’s needs and feelings); finally, in reflecting on ways of coming to decisions (consensus is preferable to a vote following the rule of a strict majority: 50% plus one vote, especially for difficult decisions: do you practice democracy in the family? And, the Church is a family).

Now let’s look at **eight curative measures**, which can be presented as a toolbox of techniques for the management of conflicts:

- 1) **Direct negotiation:** any evangelical and non-violent management of conflict should begin by trying to talk directly to each other. For that, say things beginning with oneself, of one’s own needs

and feelings. My adversary is maybe just waiting for that, and my initiative will be very welcome. Obviously, one must also be ready to face a refusal.

- 2) **Negotiation with representatives:** if speaking directly is not possible, each one of the protagonists can call on a representative, who will negotiate for him. But it is necessary for this negotiation to lead to direct contact in order to find a sustainable solution.
- 3) **Triangulation:** when talking directly appears impossible, one can fall back on a method that is very simple and yet fruitful. One of the parties in conflict solicits an outside person in whom he has complete confidence and who he knows has the complete confidence of his adversary; and he asks this person to talk to him favourably about his adversary, in order to change his opinion about him. Of course, this outside person will then do the same thing with the other party, until the two of them can again talk to each other.
- 4) **Reframing:** this fourth method asks for the intervention of a Church authority. When two parties are in conflict, an authority can come on the scene to reframe, that is, to remind them of the rules, without using its sanction power. This reframing counts on the responsibility of the parties, particularly in minor conflicts.
- 5) **Arbitration:** in this fifth method, the Church's authority also intervenes, but with a different role: not just to remind them of the framework, but in order to arbitrate, that is, to indicate the errors of each party. However, it does not yet pronounce a sanction, thus bringing together authority and power.
- 6) **Conciliation:** the two parties in conflict will solicit an outside person, a conciliator, carefully chosen for his impartiality, who will try to renew dialogue between them. In order to do this, he will listen to them, separately or together at the same table, and then propose a solution, which will be the basis of negotiation, discussed, amended, reformulated, to finally be expressed in an agreement text.
- 7) **Mediation:** the mediator is an outside person who, differently from the conciliator, will have the solution emerge from the parties themselves, without proposing anything. He should be totally exterior to the group (in this case, the Church), impartial, and recognized by the two parties for his impartiality. He proposes four rules to be followed: mutual respect, non-interruption, absolute confidentiality, and finally, a commitment to carry out the agreement they arrive at. Acceptation of these rules by the parties is essential, because the principle of mediation consists in bringing the parties closer together from micro-agreement to micro-agreement concerning the form, before arriving at agreements on the fundamentals. Then, the process is divided into two steps: the first, turned toward the past, consists of establishing the chronology of the conflict from each one's point of view, by asking each one to reformulate what he heard, in order to discover the object of the conflict; the second step turns toward the future, by encouraging each of the parties to propose solutions and react to the solutions given by the other one. Finally, the parties agree on a text, that they sign and which generally turns out to be the vector of a sustainable solution, precisely because it comes from the parties themselves and not from the outside person. This is why mediation seems to be better adapted to the situation of a Church than conciliation.
- 8) **Sanctions:** when none of the preceding methods produce a solution, the only thing left is to come back to the Church leadership so it can intervene as a judge, and no longer exercise its authority but rather its power, through disciplinary sanctions provided for in the Church statutes. However, these are internal sanctions: only the refusal to bow to these ecclesial decisions or, of course, behaviour that is more serious and transgresses civil law, would lead to asking the courts to decide the dispute. This would be an admission of failure for the Church, whose internal regulations were not effective, but it is also a counter-witness displayed in the public arena.

When one of the parties in conflict manifestly blocks and refuses any method used, it is necessary to analyze his motivations in terms of "**secondary benefits**": he must certainly find an advantage in continuing the conflict. Secondary benefits could be the following: victimization, the status quo, confrontation, clan functioning, and the scapegoat phenomenon. It is then important to analyze the need that is satisfied by these benefits (recognition, security, identity, cocooning or reinforcement, group solidity), and look for how to respond to this need in another way, without conflict.

These are some of the ways for the evangelical and non-violent management of conflicts in the Church, which are based on the principles of paulinian ethics: "My power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12, 9).