
COMMENTARY - THE DESIRE FOR COMMUNITIES: MAKING OUR WAY HOME AFTER THE CRISIS.

FIND THE ROOTS AND HIT THE ROAD

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ground from collapsing beneath them.

People long for new communities. They crave something more in their lives; they are nostalgic and long to be part of something more enduring than themselves. Fifty year old unemployed workers know the vital importance of family, relatives, friends and community. Thirty year old professionals, who haven't yet found a job, know it too. In fact, this network of relationships cushions their falls and keeps the

Families and communities can manage economic crises and other misfortunes by taking sustainable and constructive approaches. People can rise from defeat when helped by others. Deep, strong roots can hold a tree upright against tornados, floods and storms. When crises come, people seek their roots; they move closer to their families and parents. Their homeland's scent soothes their tired souls. They can save themselves by finding their inner strength and clinging to it. The atmosphere of one's homeland has healed the souls of a few my friends who returned to their childhood homes.

Trees are important symbols in Western culture. The Bible depicts both the tree "of life" and the tree "of knowledge of good and evil" as being in the center of the Garden of Eden. During the Middle Ages, the Franciscan School developed an analogy between Genesis' trees and the wood of the cross. The beautiful theological (Saint Bonaventure) and artistic (Ubertino of Casale) traditions of the *arbor crucis* portrayed the crucified Jesus on a tree in full bloom. This "happiness" tree, which grew from the wood of sorrow, represented the new "tree of life". Trees, roots and fruits are mixed symbols for communities. Though trees can survive storms, since they are rooted to the ground, they can't move away from fatal fires or droughts. Thus, according to Western humanism, a good life depends on the awareness of one's roots and the hunger for travel (*homo viator*). Hugh of Saint Victor, one of the fathers of European culture, supported this idea. In the XII century he wrote: "The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong." He then added, "But he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land." Dante represented this tradition as he described Ulysses' indomitable determination to leave to the Western seas. "Nor fondness for my son, nor reverence for my old father, nor the due affection which joyous should have made Penelope" (*Inferno*, XXVI). This wish to experience the world complements the Homeric Ulysses, who longed for his homeland (Ithaca). In the Western culture, the tree and the sea are complementary like Ithaca and the world. Likewise, monasteries' rule of stability (*stabilitas loci*) harmonizes with the wanderings of mendicant friars.

As we breathe in and out, people establish and uproot themselves; a few long for home while others wish to break free from the boredom of their residences. Good families give both to their children, roots and the help to leave home; the youth should be able to build their own houses and communities. Through its culture, Europe grew deep strong ramified roots that influence our lives. Literature reminds us of short-lived communities that based their foundations on distorted principles and others that had no roots at all. It tells us the story of uprooted individuals. For example, Cosimo, in the novel named *The Baron in the Trees*, lives in trees to run away from his origins. In many cases when Europe excluded either roots or the hunger for travel it has resulted in dire consequences for its people. Communitarian bonds became oppression while the need for roots was used to justify xenophobia, racism, nationalisms and civil wars. On the other hand, the longing for independence created solitary nihilists, who set off on journeys never to return.

Crises make people return to their roots. After the Second World War, Italians founded the Republic and Europeans rebuilt the continent through true political, social and economic miracles. However, sometimes this return can cause disasters. For example, the end of the Great War resulted in fascism, nazism and another continental war. As far as today's crisis is concerned, how will we rebuild our society? If we grasp at national interests while ignoring our Mediterranean and European roots, return will fail. It will fall through if we forget that we are citizens of the world before being Europeans. Furthermore, a constructive recovery calls for the replacement of virtual communities with real communities; the former are abstract and imaginary while the latter are built in our cities. One cannot rely on a virtual community if their members, who regard real-life strangers as online friends, don't build real relationships with their own neighbors and colleagues.

The ethics of my online interactions are not independent of how I relate to Marco and Fatima, my next door neighbors. The most important communities are independent of our preferences and tastes. We don't choose them and can run away from them at any time. A club's membership allows that similar people meet, but it closes them off from the rest of the world. The vital communities open us to different points of view; we mature and discover love within them. We chose neither our parents and siblings nor the members of our school, parish and political party. Communities give us more than friendship; they allow us to cultivate our roots and find the energy to hit the road.

Translated by Cristian Sebok