

Empathy

As a Lay Dominican I have been receiving a personal insight into the effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine from the Prior Provincial of the Ukraine who has been sending regular messages to other Dominicans around the World. It gives a glimpse into life in the Priory in Kyiv and reports too from some of the other Dominican establishments in the country. Ukraine is a much more religious place than is the UK and whilst the Majority, 67%, are Orthodox (with there being a number of Orthodox churches including a separate Ukrainian Orthodox Church and Churches with allegiance to the Patriarchate of Moscow) there are a significant number of Catholics too (10.5%). These are mostly members of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church an Eastern Church, that is in communion with Rome, but there are also Roman Catholics including Dominican Friars, Sisters and Lay Dominicans.

I mention this, not because I wanted to highlight the plight of the Dominicans in particular, but because I wanted to highlight how having a connection with those who are having to live through such terror leads to empathy. The connection means that you can feel something of what they are going through.

Sympathy involves understanding from your own perspective. Feeling sympathy is good - we should all feel sympathy. Sympathy though can be both fleeting and, at its worst, patronising. But Empathy involves putting yourself in the other person's shoes and understanding WHY they may have these particular feelings. Empathy is stronger than sympathy. It goes beyond feeling sorry for their loss. It is the ability to understand someone else's feelings by identifying with them. It means sharing in the hurt, even if only at a distance!

This is why often an individual story reported, of one person and the losses they face, can make us feel so much more than broad sweep reports about statistics and battles. Think of the effects a picture of a

dead refugee child on a beach has had on the social conscience compared impersonal reports of sinkings and migrant deaths at sea.

In today's society there is so much pressure to think primarily of yourself. But we can all make connections that enable us to feel closer to others. That's the way we are made by God - not made to live individualistic lives, not made so that the most important thing in life is me and my selfish desires, but made for community, made for friendship, made for love. In the end we are made for Communion with Him, who is Love. St Thomas Aquinas defines love as "willing the good of the other as other" - in other words it is without selfish motivation. In this he echoes the words of St Paul "Love is ...never jealous, ...never boastful or conceited, ...never rude or selfish" (1 Corinthians 13: 4-5)

When we look at the situation developing in the Ukraine, let us do so with empathy and love. Let's make the connections that help us to feel. As Christians we are bound together as brothers and sisters in Christ. Our common humanity binds us all no matter what our belief. There may not be much we can do, perhaps make a donation to help with relief. But as we come closer to Holy Week we can and should pray for all those caught up in the conflict, in love, to the God of Love whose empathy on Good Friday knew no bounds on the hill of Calvary.

God bless, RAY