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Faith and community

Reflections on fragmentation, suffering, and Gospel

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- *church as divided community*
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Introduction

During the past sixteen years, I have lived in two of the largest cities in the world. For seven years I lived in Los Angeles, with a population of approximately 12 million in the greater metropolitan area. For the past six years, I have lived in Sao Paulo, Brazil that has a population of approximately 16 million in the greater metropolitan area. For the past six years, I have lived in Sao Paulo, Brazil, that has a population of approximately 19 million in the greater metropolitan area. Sao Paulo is what I would call an almost unlivable city. It has an average of 65 violent deaths every weekend, is incredibly polluted, measures traffic jams in kilometers, has incredible poverty and incredible wealth and is deeply fragmented in terms of its identity. It is also incredibly alive, but alive in the same way that some adolescents are alive. It has incredible energy and resources, but little or no direction or guiding center.

Yet, the more I think about it, I do not live in Sao Paulo. I actually live in a series of small communities that sustain and help me find meaning, orientation and a sense of identity. I live in the communities of my house, my street, my neighborhood, the university, my friends and colleagues and the community of the church. I do not think I could endure to literally live in Sao Paulo. It is too large, too complex, too violent, too unjust, and too fragmented. I can only live in the midst of this fragmentation because of my communities. However, each these communities exists in the midst of Sao Paulo. They are affected by the reality in which they exist, and this is a reality of work, concrete, poverty and fragmentation. They exist in the midst of and are affected by a context that is often dominated by lack of meaning, uncertainty and, sometimes, despair. This holds true for the Church. It is deeply affected by the surrounding environment, by the fragmentation and diversity of the city. It reflects, directly and indirectly, the fragmentation and, sometimes, despair of the city.

It is from this perspective that I approach the theme of this Seminar, “Cities - Fragmentation of Human Life” and my specific topic, “Creating Communities Through Pastoral Care” in the midst of this reality. My central question is: How can the Church build and maintain community in the midst of the fragmentation of human life, and how is it affected by this fragmentation? Another way of asking this question is: How can the Church be a community of faith in a context where deep and sustaining faith seems to be almost unimaginable, or, worse, where faith is put to the use of almost every imaginable ideology? The words that keep appearing are Community and Faith, or Community and Gospel.

Community and Gospel

The word “community” refers to the obligations, gifts, presence, identity and meaning that persons bring to one another, offer one another or hold in common.¹ The opposite of community is immunity. To be immune is to be without, obligation, shared meaning or identity or common ground. Community supports connections and relationships. Immunity fosters fragmentation and isolation. If I live in community, I am open to or a part of shared experiences. If I am immune, I am not open to or part of shared experiences. In this sense, community is very similar to the idea of covenant. A covenant is a shared vision or identity that gives a group of people a sense of shared direction.² Community and covenant give birth to fellowship, or mutual caring and sharing. The Church seeks to be a community in covenant and fellowship. But what is it that creates this covenant, fellowship and community?

The Church is, or seeks to be, a community of faith. It is, or seeks to be, a community in the sense of being in covenant and fellowship with one another in the midst of a shared faith. The focus of this community of faith has traditionally been understood in terms of the “Gospel”. While there are innumerable interpretations of the central message and meaning of the Gospel, the elements that historically bind the Christian community together in faith appear in the classic Apostles’ and Nicene creeds. Both creeds treat the three baptismal questions that appear in the primitive Church: God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Thus, in the broadest possible terms, it can be said that the Gospel, or the Christian community of faith, relates to a set of fundamental beliefs in the existence and activity of One God, the redeeming action of Jesus Christ as God’s Son, and the Holy Spirit as God’s continuing presence and activity in the world. A fundamental tenet behind this Trinitarian formula is that God is loving and actively working for the transformation or salvation of the world, praxis, and that the defining historical moment of this loving work is Jesus Christ. The fundamental ethical norm or mandate of the Gospel can be described as love of neighbor. In this sense, the Gospel is about building communities of shared faith and action in loving response to the love, the praxis, of God.

The question at hand, however, is: How? How do we build communities of faith in the midst of such seemingly overwhelming fragmentation both within the Church and around the church, in urban societies? Or, put another way, what does it mean to be deeply and truly pastoral in the midst of the realities in which we

¹ “Community, Fellowship, and Care”, J.R. Buruck, *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Rodney J. Hunter, ed., Abingdon Press, Nashville, p. 202-203, 1990.

² *Ibid.*, p. 202.

live? I would like to offer a theological response to these questions. More specifically, I want to examine the theological, or ideological, fragmentation within the Church, how this fragmentation reflects the Church, and offer a possible way to build bridges across the chasms that divide us.

The Church: A community divided

Theologically, the Church is divided in terms of how to respond to modern culture and its post-modern relativism of values. I believe that these theological responses can be divided into two broad groups or categories. Both are responses to the fragmentation of the modern world and post-modern understandings of values, truths and universals, and both offer pastoral responses regarding how to live, bring to life or construct the Gospel.

Two broad coalitions of religious, political and theological groups within the modern Christian Church have created moral and value positions that are deeply divided and divisive. Whether the issue is abortion, art, pornography, women's rights, women in the ordained ministry, prayer in public settings, homosexuality, Biblical interpretation, economic policy, the family, the relation of the church to government, refugee or the basic identity and function of the Church these two theological groups appear to dominate theological discussion. James Davison Hunter has proposed the names "Orthodox" and "Progressive" to describe these two opposing theological positions.³

"Orthodox" and "Progressive" are not well defined groups or movements, and they do not always agree on every issue. They are, instead, broad movements within both popular and academic Christian theology and culture. Each claims ownership of the ideals of justice and freedom, the meaning of religion and morality, the place of scripture and how the Church should define itself in relationship to culture. Both positions also support specific pastoral beliefs and practices regarding how the Church should respond to our fragmented and fragmenting urban life.

The Orthodox group honors external sources of authority that are located in holy scriptures, received traditions and in authorized interpretations of these sources. These authorized interpretations are seen in legal terms. Authority, as such, has a fixed and unchanging quality that is anchored in beliefs in "laws of nature" or "laws of God". As such, the orthodox group appeals to universally binding moral rules and religious beliefs that are found in their traditions.

This group tends to understand freedom in economic terms, and not in the context of freedom of human action or personal choice. Freedom generally means freedom to pursue economic goals, commitment to the global market, or free market systems, and capitalism without the restraint of government. As such, this theological vision generally supports governments that are supportive of free market capitalism and the maintenance of what may be called "traditional Christian values".

From this point of view, justice is seen as adherence to the laws of God. A just society, then, is one in which persons follow traditional standards, or the laws of

³ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars*, Basic Books, New York, 1991.

God, and thus create a lawful and moral society.⁴ In many ways, traditional understandings of Christian righteousness are seen as almost indistinguishable from God's justice and Gospel.

Pastoral action is generally seen in moral or ethical terms. The world is seen as sinful and chaotic and the Church as a protective and sustaining community in the midst of temptation and loss of values. Marital problems, divorce, emotional or spiritual problems, anxiety or lack of personal goals and direction are seen less as results of living in a complex and fragmented world and more as the result of personal sin or moral weakness which is due to a lack of conformity to the "laws of God". This pastoral vision could be described, metaphorically, as "A Mighty Fortress is Our God". Within the fortress of faith, the world should be a relatively stable and understandable place. An extension of this general belief is that economic stability and success are fruits of righteousness. Right behavior, our righteousness, is frequently associated with economic gains.

The role of the pastor, or of pastoral agents, is that of authoritative agent. To pastor means to orient the person, family and community in terms of how to live in accordance to the law's of God as presented in the scriptures and traditions of the group. Authoritative preaching and teaching are the primary pastoral roles. Pastoral counseling is frequently based in educational or Biblical counseling. The primary pastoral metaphor is how to resist the chaos, fragmentation and temptation of the world, and dwell in the Mighty Fortress of righteousness. This includes pastoral support for cultural, economic and political institutions and actions that are seen as supportive of God's righteousness.

The Progressive group tends to reject orthodox beliefs in any specific scriptures or traditions as sources of authority. Instead of belief in specific external sources of authority, this group believes in the centrality of broad ethical principles that are frequently a synthesis of broad Christian beliefs and humanist, or enlightenment, traditions. The individual, family, group and culture must be guided by principles and traditions, but these are seen as broad guidelines which the person uses as sources for creating internal, or personal, values. Instead of seeing scriptures, traditions and moralities as fixed sources of external authority, this group believes that values are always in the process of evolution.

Freedom is understood as the protection of the personal, social and political rights of the individual in the sense of avoiding interference of personal actualization. This interference may come from social, political or religious forces. Justice means equal rights for all persons and groups, and overcoming all forms of oppression. Oppression, in this sense, means limitations to personal and group actualization. Freedom, then, is understood socially, as individual rights, while justice is seen in terms of establishing equality. The specific content of freedom and justice is not defined by appealing exclusively to scripture or tradition, but by interpreting these in broad ways in light of humanistic values and beliefs, particularly in terms of human potential and actualization.

Consequently, pastoral action is viewed from the perspective of how to actualize the potentialities of the person, family, group or institution. The world is seen less as a sinful place and more as placing unreasonable, artificial or oppressive limits on the person. Actualization must take place in a social context, so retreat from the world is seen in negative terms. Pastoral action, then, must be focused on and take place in the world. While progressives try, with great passion, to see personal

⁴ Hunter (*op.cit*), p. 112.

and social problems as caused by a combination of environmental and spiritual factors, these problems are very frequently analyzed and interpreted, in first place, via the instruments of the social sciences, and only secondarily from a spiritual perspective.

The role of the pastor, or of pastoral agents, is that of compassionate companion, teacher and guide. Since progressive pastoral agents generally reject the authoritative place of scripture or tradition, they frequently rely on reason and personal experience. The goal of pastoral action is to help the person create meaning in the midst of innumerable possibilities, or discover how to best live in the world. Scripture and tradition are seen as fundamental guides, but not as definitive. Preaching and teaching continue to hold a central place in progressive pastoral action, but they are understood in the context of challenge and encouragement, toward actualization, rather than the proclamation of the defining Word of God. Pastoral counseling and spiritual guidance also occupy important places in this pastoral model. However, once again, these are often more influenced by psychology, sociology and anthropology than by traditional spiritual disciplines.

Theory and praxis

While this broad description may apply more to North, Central and South America than to Europe, these two theological visions greatly affect all theological conversation. The Orthodox group generally includes fundamentalists, some charismatics, conservative evangelicals, traditional Roman Catholics and Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal churches and groups. The Progressive group tends to include more liberal mainline or traditional Protestant Churches and groups within the Roman Catholic Church. Both the Orthodox belief in righteousness based in adhering to revealed truths and the Progressive belief in inner authority and actualization are deeply held interpretations of the relationship between God, Person and Creation. At least at the extremes of these two groups, the difference between the two positions is so great that dialogue is impossible. Even in the more moderate interpretations of these positions, dialogue frequently breaks down when the two positions begin to explore the implicit beliefs behind their theological language.

What is of fundamental importance to the present discussion concerning “Cities - Fragmentations of Human Life” and “Creating Communities through Pastoral Care” is that both theological positions are reactions to the confusion and relativism of values in contemporary culture. Orthodox groups react to cultural fragmentation by appealing to revealed truth in an effort to build “A Mighty Fortress”. Progressive groups react to cultural fragmentation by a frequent over-dependency and trust in conscious rationality and the ability to self-create and self-actualize. The fragmentation of our world can be clearly seen in the internal divisions of the Church and in the pastoral models supported by these theologies. While there clearly exists a middle ground, where beliefs are not held in absolute terms, the voices frequently heard in theological debates tend to be those of the extremes in both groups. Even among more moderates, theological discussion frequently fails when fundamental beliefs are revealed. The result is theological confrontation instead of dialogue. Such confrontational attitudes create deep fragmentation within the Church that appears to have no hope for reconciliation. It also serves to reinforce secular views that the Church has little to offer in terms of the creation of genuine community centered in a shared faith in the presence and action of a lov-

ing God. Or, in other words, from a secular point of view: “Why trust an institution, the Church, that preaches love and practices intolerance? Why trust an institution that preaches community and lives in fragmentation?”

How then can we respond to our own internal fragmentation in the hope of building genuine community in the light of the Gospel? I believe that the fundamental challenge is to discover how to live with relativity without succumbing to relativism. This involves learning how to hold apparent opposites in tension with one another without falling into the constant temptation to go to extremes. It is a temptation to surrender reason and experience to scripture and tradition. It is a temptation to surrender scripture and tradition to reason and experience. The challenge is to hold each in a dynamic tension with the others. I am not certain this can be done at the level of rational theory or theologizing. In fact, I have deep doubts that the Church will ever manage to build theoretical, academic or intellectual bridges between its divergent theologies, moralities and ethics. It may be that the solution to healing our fragmentation and building community is less at the theoretical, academic or intellectual levels than it is at the level of shared experience and praxis. James Fowler has suggested that: “At the heart of theology’s challenge at the end of modernity is the practical theological task of evoking and shaping a depiction of the praxis of God. Related to that task is the challenge to help postmodern persons and cultures claim the possibility of shaping their lives and institutional systems in response to and in partnership with the praxis of God.”⁵

In his book *Faithful Change. The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*, Fowler presents several theological and pastoral models which reflect the praxis of God.⁶ I would like to present, and expand on, one of these as a way of building pastoral community in the midst theological fragmentation.

Liberation and political theologies and a common language of suffering

One of the realities that is shared by the human community as a whole is suffering. Johannes Metz has said that “I could never again do theology with my back to Auschwitz.”⁷ The same could equally be said in terms of a South American *favela*, slum, or the massacre of Indigenous Persons by groups in search of gold or lumber. Both realities point to the central issues of theodicy, suffering and praxis. “Political Theologies in Germany and Latin American Liberation Theologies have made the questions of massive suffering and the maldistribution of resources and possibilities in our world the starting points for reinterpreting Christian faith and the calling of the churches in our time.”⁸ These theologies are fundamentally practical. Their roots are in the life and suffering of individuals and groups in concrete historical situations. They do not focus on middle class individual or family contexts, values or actualization or on questions of absolute revealed truth, authenticity or meaning. Their focus is on the lived experience of those on the margins of power, or totally excluded from power and on the shared human experience of

⁵ James Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996.

⁶ Fowler (*op.cit.*), 1996.

⁷ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza and David Tracy, eds., *The Holocaust as Interruption, Concilium vol. 175*, T&T Clark, Edinburg, 1984.

⁸ Fowler (*op.cit.*), p. 182.

suffering. Yet, the importance and power of scripture is central. These theologies seek to understand suffering and freedom from within the lived experiences of persons and groups and at the same time locate the praxis of God in the context of history. Sociological and political analysis of culture are used to inform and reform the actions of the Church in the world. However, these analyses are constantly critiqued in the light of scripture in the sense of asking the question: “How has God acted in the world in the past, as present in scripture, and how is God acting in the present?” The praxis of God, then, is central. The analysis of the social sciences is understood and applied in light of the nature and praxis of God.

The Political Theology of *Johann Baptist Metz* is a good example of this dialogue between the praxis of God and the analysis of social situations. Metz does not use the term “political” in the narrow sense of political parties, but in the broader, original sense of the polis, society as a whole, government, culture and economy. Political Theology is a theology of the polis, a theology that examines social structures, cultural movements, and economic philosophies in the light of the Gospel. This relationship between faith, analysis and the praxis of God can be seen in Metz’s definition of faith:

“The faith of Christians is a praxis in history and society that is to be understood as hope in solidarity in the God of Jesus as a God of the living and the dead who calls all men to be subjects in his presence. Christians justify themselves in this essentially apocalyptic praxis in their historical struggle for their fellow men. They stand up for all men in their attempt to become subjects in solidarity with each other. In this praxis they resist the danger of both a creeping evolutionary disintegration of the history of men as subjects and of an increasing negation of the individual in view of a new, post-middle-class image of man.”⁹

Such approaches attempt to do theology in terms of the action of God in the world. Theology is not focused on the centrality of universal truths or the power of human reason, but on how God has and is acting in the world. Metz, in particular, recognizes that the suffering of the excluded, middle and upper class persons must be recognized as suffering. Suffering is suffering. However, the degree and extent of suffering, marginalization and exclusion must be acknowledged.

What is of fundamental importance is not who is suffering more or less, but the centrality of God’s action in the world with those who suffer. The reality of suffering and God’s praxis in the name of liberation and reconciliation take the place of revealed authoritative truth or individual rationality and actualization as the foundations for theological reflection and the creation of community.

A related approach to suffering is that of *Dorothee Soelle*. In her books *Suffering*¹⁰ and *Theology for Sceptics*¹¹, Soelle deals with the experience of suffering and images of God which serve to reinforce the fragmentation of community and human suffering. She, like Guierrez, identifies the problem, the sin, of idolatry as central to our suffering and fragmentation. She questions the idolatrous God of power, authority and transcendence in light of a God who truly participates in human life and at the same time is genuinely transcendent. Her theology begins with the ex-

⁹ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, New York, The Seabury Press, 1980, p. 73.

¹⁰ Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1974.

¹¹ Dorothee Soelle, *Theology for Sceptics*, London, Mowbray, 1995.

perience of being wounded. Her God is a God who suffers with us. She distinguishes between the suffering of the world, which is blind, superficial and produces only death, and God's suffering which produces a "repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret" (2 Corinthians 7:10). This is suffering which is based in injustice and the destruction of life. Her theology is focused on how it is that we can link the suffering of the world with God's suffering. As such, Christology is central to her thought, but it is a Christology that values the importance of life before death much more than life after death. Life after death is, certainly, important, but it is what comes before death that is of fundamental importance to any understanding of God.

What may make Soelle crucial for the current discussion is that her work is much less systematic than that of Metz, Gutierrez or Pannenberg, who seems to be her theological opposite, and much more oriented toward communicating a few basic images, ideas and experiences. While this may limit her acceptability to systematic theologians, it increases her access to a broader public that, via her focus on shared experience, has the potential of crossing the boundary between "Orthodox" and "Progressive" beliefs. Her use of images, stories, experiences and feelings may provide a bridge which systematic thought is incapable of building.

The Liberation Theology of *Gustavo Gutierrez* shares many common features with the Political Theology of Metz in terms of the centrality of experience, or the experience of suffering, and the necessity of reflecting on experience in light of scripture. For Gutierrez, theology is critical reflection on praxis. This reflection is not only the epistemological reflection of Kant, but also critical reflection in terms of the economic and social realities of life, particularly the reality of human suffering. A key element is the search for the economic, cultural and ideological pre-suppositions that we bring to our reflection on life and praxis.

Theology as critical reflection thus fulfills a liberating function for humankind and the Christian community, preserving them from fetishism and idolatry, as well as from a pernicious and belittling narcissism.¹²

This understanding of theology challenges Biblical, economic, political, social, psychological and theological ideologies that create fragmentation within the community of the Church. Our action should be oriented not toward satisfying our ideologies, or our limited truths, but toward transforming the world in light of the Gospel. Thus, the actions of the Christian community must always be oriented by the presence and activity of the Spirit, rather than by our desire for safety or self-actualization. For Gutierrez, the presence and action of the Spirit are reflected in the desire for transformation and liberation in both spiritual and historical terms. Spiritual and historical transformation cannot be separated. While the meaning of historical transformation is clearly open for debate, it includes, without any doubt, the concept of community as opposed to immunity. The fragmentation and narcissism of our communities contributes, in profound ways, to human suffering. As such, the healing of our fragmented lives and communities is a crucial factor in the creation of genuine community that promotes liberation.

For Gutierrez, one of the central factors in avoiding fetishism, idolatry and narcissism is the constant return to a new reading of the scriptures that is deeply sensitive to their historical circumstances and how the Spirit is speaking today. This

¹² Gustavo Gutierrez, *Liberation Theology*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1988, p. 10.

focus on the scriptures helps to avoid an artificial reliance on the social sciences and the power of rational thought, without rejecting these as valid tools. However, a literal or authoritative reading of the scriptures is also avoided via an acknowledgment of the importance of understanding their historical and cultural contexts.

One often-overlooked aspect of the work of Gutierrez is the idea of evangelization that raises consciousness. Evangelization, in this sense, means educating, stimulating, inspiring, challenging and orienting all human actions in the light of the Gospel.¹³ Evangelization does not mean the conversion of the world to one understanding or interpretation of the Gospel, but a reunion of the shared truth present in the Gospel. For Gutierrez, this shared truth is very similar to Paul Tillich's understanding of moving beyond our little gods in order to have faith in the God beyond the gods.¹⁴ However, Gutierrez understands this deep faith not as existential affirmation but as concrete and religious liberation or transformation of person and world in the light of the active love of God.

Liberation and Political Theologies have generally either begun with or been adopted by individuals and groups associated with "Progressive Theology". This has sometimes led to individualistic and highly rational arguments about the nature of suffering, who needs to be liberated first, or who has suffered more, and a possible overuse of sociological and political analysis. However, it would appear that Liberation and Political Theologies continue to correct their course when they stray into the extremes. This is most obvious in the return to Biblical sources and analysis and a focus on concrete experiences.

Of fundamental importance to the present is the centrality of the experience of suffering. Fragmentation creates suffering and suffering creates fragmentation. It is a vicious circle. Thus, a central question for Liberation and Political Theologies is how to understand and participate in the praxis of God in the midst of fragmentation toward the creation of genuine community. One response to this central concern is that it is the task of the Church, particularly in its pastoral action, to identify with and seek to alleviate suffering as the key to healing our fragmented world and creating genuine community.

This means that the alleviation of suffering takes precedence over the defense of an idea, an ideal or a universal principle. It also means that the alleviation of suffering takes precedence over individual actualization and the immediate satisfaction of perceived needs. The alleviation of suffering is directly linked to the praxis of God. For Liberation and Political Theologies, this is the meaning of genuine community that participates in the praxis of God, or living the Gospel.

Final considerations

The fundamental proposal of this presentation is to explore the human experience of suffering, as understood in Liberation and Political Theologies, as one way of overcoming, or healing, the fragmentation that exists within Christian theology and pastoral action. The creation of community as an expression of faith or Gospel is fundamental to the creation of community, and to pastoral care, within the Christian faith. At present, the Church is deeply fragmented in terms of its understanding of Gospel, and, consequently, the meaning of pastoral action. These divi-

¹³ Neil Ormerod, *Introducing Contemporary Theologies*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1997, p. 148.

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1957.

sions reflect cultural fragmentation in terms of values, meaning, goals and identity. It would appear that this fragmentation has more to do with creeds, dogmas and systematic articulations of faith than it does with the shared human experience of suffering. This is not to say that creeds, dogmas and systematic theologies are not important. It does mean that unthinking, or highly cognitive, allegiance to certain creeds, dogmas and systematics can create barriers or divisions that fragment shared experiences.

To create community requires a shared sense of identity and direction that can overcome our sense of immunity, or fragmentation. This does not mean that everyone within a community must be in total agreement. It does mean that everyone within a community has a shared sense of direction and meaning. This is the genuine meaning of sharing a common faith and living in community and not immunity.

It is doubtful that the Christian “community” is capable of finding unity at a rational or theoretical level, at least in the immediate future. The fragmentation within the Church may be too great. It is at the level of image or shared vision that we may be able to create community in Spirit. Political or Liberation “Theologies”, as intellectual disciplines, may not be adequate, as theologies, to heal the divisions that we are currently experiencing. The words “Political” and “Liberation” carry great emotional and intellectual “baggage”. Everyone has an opinion, positive or negative, about these theologies. The word “Suffering”, on the other hand, may be a starting point. At the very least, these theologies name suffering as their central concern. Suffering may be the shared experience that can provide us with a common metaphor. As an image or a shared experience, suffering is a human experience that everyone in the Christian, and human, community seeks to overcome, transform or heal. What divides us, as a Christian community, is how we heal or transform our suffering, or how we can best fulfill the Gospel and transform immunity into community. Political and Liberation Theologies may be able to provide us with a language for the centrality of the human experience of suffering. Almost certainly, though, we will have to move beyond the „theologies“, and their related ideologies, in order to make the lived experience of suffering central. However, if we can agree on a starting point, the truth that we all have suffered, we have at least laid the foundations for the possibility of agreeing upon what it is that needs to be healed or transformed. We can, at the *very* least, begin to build community amidst fragmentation by sharing:

1. How we have suffered,
2. How we have caused others to suffer,
3. What our suffering and the suffering of others means to us,
4. How we feel God is present in the midst of our suffering,
5. How God is acting to heal our suffering, and
6. How we believe we can best face and heal our suffering as a community united in love and justice.

This is, at least, a beginning.