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Chapter 5



Displacement

Moving from the Ordinary and Proper Place

The word *community* generally expresses a certain supportive and nurturing way of living and working together. When someone says, "I miss a sense of community here; something should be done to build a better community," she or he is probably suffering from alienation, loneliness, or lack of mutual support and cooperation. The desire for community is most often a desire for a sense of unity, a feeling of being accepted, and an experience of at-homeness. It is therefore not strange that for quite a few critical observers of the contemporary scene, the word *community* has become associated with sentimentalism, romanticism, and even melancholy.

If we want to reflect on community in the context of compassion, we must go far beyond these spontaneous associations. Community can never be the place where God's obedient servanthood reveals itself if community is understood principally as something warm, soft, homey, comfortable, or protective. When we form community primarily to heal personal wounds, it cannot become

the place where we effectively realize solidarity with other people's pains.

The paradox of the Christian community is that people are gathered together in voluntary displacement. The togetherness of those who form a Christian community is a being-gathered-in-displacement. According to Webster's dictionary, displacement means, to move or to shift from the ordinary or proper place. This becomes a telling definition when we realize the extent to which we are preoccupied with adapting ourselves to the prevalent norms and values of our milieu. We want to be ordinary and proper people who live ordinary and proper lives. There is an enormous pressure on us to do what is ordinary and proper—even the attempt to excel is ordinary and proper—and thus find the satisfaction of general acceptance. This is quite understandable since the ordinary and proper behavior that gives shape to an ordinary and proper life offers us the comforting illusion that things are under control and that everything extraordinary and improper can be kept outside the walls of our self-created fortress.

The call to community as we hear it from our Lord is the call to move away from the ordinary and proper places. Leave your father and mother. Let the dead bury the dead. Keep your hand on the plow and do not look back. Sell what you own, give the money to the poor and come follow me (Lk 14:26; 9:60, 62; 18:22). The Gospels confront us with this persistent voice inviting us to move from where it is comfortable, from where we want to stay, from where we feel at home.

Why is this so central? It is central because in voluntary displacement, we cast off the illusion of "having it together" and thus begin to experience our true condition, which is that we, like everyone else, are pilgrims on the way, sinners in need of grace. Through voluntary displacement, we counteract the tendency to become settled in a false comfort and to forget the fundamentally

unsettled position that we share with all people. Voluntary displacement leads us to the existential recognition of our inner brokenness and thus brings us to a deeper solidarity with the brokenness of our fellow human beings. Community, as the place of compassion, therefore always requires displacement. The Greek word for church, *ekklesia*—from *ek* = out, and *kaleo* = call—indicates that as a Christian community we are people who together are called out of our familiar places to unknown territories, out of our ordinary and proper places to the places where people hurt and where we can experience with them our common human brokenness and our common need for healing.

In voluntary displacement community is formed, deepened, and strengthened. In voluntary displacement we discover each other as members of the same human family with whom we can share our joys and sorrows. Each time we want to move back to what is ordinary and proper, each time we yearn to be settled and feel at home, we erect walls between ourselves and others, undermine community, and reduce compassion to the soft part of an essentially competitive life.

Following the Displaced Lord

Voluntary displacement as a way of life rather than as a unique event is the mark of discipleship. Jesus, whose compassion we want to manifest in time and place, is indeed displaced. Paul describes Jesus as the one who voluntarily displaced himself. "His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as we are" (Ph 2:6–7). A greater displacement cannot be conceived. The mystery of the incarnation is that God did not remain in the place that we consider proper for God but moved to the condition of a

suffering human being. God *gave up* the heavenly place and took a humble place among mortal men and women. God became displaced so that nothing human would be alien and the brokenness of our human condition could be fully experienced.

In the life of Jesus, we see how this divine displacement becomes visible in a human story. As a child, Jesus is taken to Egypt to protect him against the threats of King Herod. As a boy, he leaves his parents and stays in the Temple to listen to the doctors and ask them questions. As an adult, he goes into the desert for forty days to fast and to be tempted by the demon. During the years of ministry that follow, Jesus continuously moves away from power, success, and popularity in order to remain faithful to his divine call. When the people are excited because of his healing powers, he confronts them with their sins and is not afraid to evoke their anger. When they are so impressed by his ability to give bread that they want to make him their king, he moves away and challenges them to work for the food that gives eternal life. When his disciples ask for a special place in his kingdom, he asks them if they can drink the cup of suffering, and when they hope for a quick victory, he speaks of pain and death. Finally, these displacements lead him to the cross. There, rejected by all and feeling abandoned by God, Jesus becomes the most displaced human being. Thus, Jesus' displacement, which began with his birth in Bethlehem, finds its fullest expression in his death on a cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. Paul gives words to this mystery by saying, "Being as we are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross" (Ph 2:7–8).

Jesus Christ is the displaced Lord in whom God's compassion becomes flesh. In him, we see a life of displacement lived to the fullest. It is in following our displaced Lord that the Christian community is formed.

To Disappear as an Object of Interest

We must now look more deeply into the way in which displacement becomes a way to compassionate community. At first sight, displacement seems disruptive. Many people who have experienced harsh, cruel displacements can testify that displacement unsettled their family life, destroyed their sense of security, created much anger and resentment, and left them with the feeling that their lives were irreparably harmed. Displaced people, therefore, are not necessarily compassionate people. Many have become fearful, suspicious, and prone to complain. In a world with millions of displaced people, we need to be careful not to romanticize displacement or to make it an easy prescription for people who seek to live compassionate lives.

But we must also say that especially in a world with so many violent and cruel displacements, Jesus' call to voluntary displacement has a very contemporary ring. It is obviously not a call to disruptive behavior, but a call to solidarity with the millions who live disrupted lives.

The paradox of voluntary displacement is that although it seems to separate us from the world—from father, mother, brothers, sisters, family, and friends—we actually find ourselves in deeper union with it. Voluntary displacement leads to compassionate living precisely because it moves us from positions of distinction to positions of sameness, from being in special places to being everywhere. This movement is well described by Thomas Merton. After twenty years of Trappist life, he writes in the preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "My monastery . . . is a place in which I disappear from the world as an object of interest in order to be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion."¹⁰ To disappear from the world as an object of interest in order to be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion is the basic move-

ment of the Christian life. It is the movement that leads to community as well as to compassion. It leads us to see with others what we could not see before, to feel with others what we could not feel before, to hear with others what we could not hear before.

The implications for each of us individually vary according to the specific milieus in which we live and our concrete understandings of God's call for us. The fact that for Thomas Merton voluntary displacement meant leaving his teaching position and entering a Trappist monastery is secondary. For Martin Luther it meant leaving the monastery and speaking out against scandalous clerical practices; for Dietrich Bonhoeffer it meant returning from the United States to Germany and becoming a prisoner of the Nazis; for Simone Weil it meant leaving her middle-class milieu and working in factories as a common laborer; for Martin Luther King, Jr., it meant leaving the "ordinary and proper" place of the blacks and leading protest marches. But for many people it does not even mean physical movement, but a new attitude toward their factual displacement and a faithful perseverance in their unspectacular lives. None of these men and women, whether famous or unknown, desired to abandon the world. They did not want to escape from responsibilities. They did not want to close their eyes to the great pains and problems of their time. They did not want to withdraw into pietism or self-centered introspection. Their sole aim was to disappear as an object of interest—an object of competition and rivalry, an object that can be bought and sold, used or misused, measured, compared, evaluated, and weighed—and thus become real members of the human family by hiddenness and compassion. As long as our primary concern in life is to be interesting and thus worthy of special attention, compassion cannot manifest itself. Therefore, the movement toward compassion always starts by gaining distance from the world that wants to make us objects of interest.

It is worth noting the great role voluntary displacement has

played in the history of Christianity. Benedict went to Subiaco, Francis to the Carceri, Ignatius to Manresa, Charles de Foucauld to the Sahara, John Wesley to the poor districts in England, Mother Teresa to Calcutta, and Dorothy Day to the Bowery. With their followers, they moved from the ordinary and proper places to the places where they could experience and express their compassionate solidarity with those in whom the brokenness of the human condition was most visible. We can indeed say that voluntary displacement stands at the origin of all great religious reforms.

St. Francis of Assisi

The most inspiring and challenging example of displacement is St. Francis of Assisi. In 1209, this son of a wealthy merchant tore his clothes from his body and walked away from his family and friends to live a life of abject poverty. By moving naked out of the fortified city with its power and security and by living in caves and in the open fields, Francis called attention to the basic poverty of humanity. He revealed not only his own nakedness but also the nakedness of all people before God. From this displaced position, Francis could live a compassionate life; he was no longer blinded by apparent differences between people and could recognize them all as brothers and sisters who needed God's grace as much as he did. G. K. Chesterton writes:

What gave him extraordinary personal power was this; that from the Pope to the beggar, from the Sultan of Syria in his pavilion to the ragged robbers crawling out of the wood, there was never a man who looked into those brown burning eyes without being certain that Francis Bernardone was really interested in *him*, in his own inner individual life from the cradle to the grave; that he himself was being valued and taken

seriously, and not merely added to the spoils of some social policy or the names in some clerical document . . . He treated the whole mob of men as a mob of Kings.¹¹

In the small group of brothers who followed Francis in his poverty, the compassionate life was lived. These men, who had nothing to share but their poverty and who made themselves fully dependent on God's grace, formed a genuine fellowship of the weak in which they could live together in compassion and extend their compassion to all whom they met on the road. Their communal life of poverty prepared them for unlimited compassion. Chesterton writes that Francis' argument for poverty was "that the dedicated man might go anywhere among any kind of men, even the worst kind of men, so long as there was nothing by which they could hold him. If he had any ties or needs like ordinary men, he would become like ordinary men."¹²

St. Francis offers us an impressive example of displacement that leads to community and compassion. By moving away from their "ordinary and proper places," St. Francis and his followers illuminated the oneness of the human race. They did this not only by the way they lived together but also by the way they created space for others in their common life.

The history of the Franciscans, however, also illustrates that as soon as success and wealth seduce people back to their ordinary and proper places, community as well as compassion is hard to find. This was not only true for the Franciscans but also for many other religious groups as well. It is therefore understandable that the history of Christianity is filled with reformers who constantly displace themselves to remind us of our great vocation to a compassionate life.

If we really want to be compassionate people, it is urgent that we reclaim this great tradition of displacement. As long as our

houses, parishes, convents, and monasteries are only ordinary and proper places, they will only awaken ordinary and proper responses and nothing will happen. As long as religious people are well dressed, well fed, and well cared for, words about being in solidarity with the poor will remain pious words more likely to evoke good feelings than creative actions. As long as we are only doing well what others are doing better and more efficiently, we can hardly expect to be considered the salt of the earth or the light of the world. In short, as long as we avoid displacement, we will miss the compassionate life to which Jesus calls us.

Those who, like St. Francis, have followed Jesus faithfully have shown us that by disappearing from the world as objects of interest we can be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion. Living in the world as objects of interest alienates us from it. Living in the world by hiddenness and compassion unites us with it because it allows us to discover the world in the center of our being. It is not hard to notice that those who are very involved in the world are often out of touch with its deepest struggles and pains, while those who live in solitude and community often have a great knowledge of the significant events of their time and a great sensitivity to the people who are subject to these events.

Thus, displacement makes it possible to be *in* the world without being *of* it. For this Jesus prayed on the evening of his death: "Father . . . I am not asking you to remove them from the world, but to protect them from the evil one. . . . As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (Jn 17:15, 18).

Something to Recognize

Let us not mistake the idea of voluntary displacement as an invitation to dramatic action. We might think that in order to become compassionate people we must make great farewell gestures to our

families, friends, homes, and jobs. Such an interpretation of the call to displacement is more in the spirit of the American pioneers than in the spirit of the disciples of Christ. What we need to understand above all else is that voluntary displacement can only be an expression of discipleship when it is a response to a call—or, to say the same thing, when it is an act of obedience.

Christians whose lives are marked by impressive forms of displacement explain their movements not as self-initiated projects with clear-cut objectives and goals, but as responses to a divine invitation that usually requires a long time to be heard and understood. St. Francis' dramatic gesture of stripping himself and returning his clothes to his father can only be seen as an act of discipleship because it was the climax of many years of inner struggle to discover God's will. Only very slowly after dreams, visions, and years of prayer and consultation did Francis become aware that God was calling him to a life of total poverty. Mother Teresa tells a similar story. She did not leave her community to work with the dying in Calcutta simply because she considered this a good idea or a necessary task, but because she heard God calling her and she found this call confirmed by those from whom she asked advice and guidance. Those who practice voluntary displacement as a method or technique to form new community, and thus to become compassionate, will soon find themselves entangled in their own complex motivations and involved in many conflicts and much confusion.

This is an important consideration, especially in a time when so many forms of self-styled "holiness" are being promulgated. Even the desire to be a saintly person has become subject to false and often destructive forms of ascetical behavior, a fact that reveals more about our needs than about God's call. Saints and "outstanding" Christians should, therefore, never be perceived as people whose concrete behavior must be imitated. Rather, we should see

in them living reminders that God calls every human being in a unique way and each of us ought to be attentive to God's voice in our own unique lives.

What does this mean for us in terms of voluntary displacement? If voluntary displacement is such a central theme in the life of Christ and his followers, must we not begin by displacing ourselves? Probably not. Rather, we must begin to identify in our own lives where displacement is already occurring. We may be dreaming of great acts of displacement while failing to notice in the displacements of our own lives the first indications of God's presence.

We do not have to look very long or far to find displacements in our lives. Most of us have experienced painful physical displacements. We have moved from one country to another, from West to East, from North to South, from a small town to a large city, from a small, intimate high school to a large, impersonal university, from a playful work milieu to a competitive position; in short, from familiar to very unfamiliar surroundings. Beyond these physical displacements, our lives may be marked by deep inner displacements. As the years go by, familiar images and ideas are often pushed out of place. Ways of thinking, which for many years helped us to understand our world, come under criticism and are called old-fashioned or conservative. Rituals and customs that played central roles in the years of our growth and development are suddenly no longer appreciated by our children or neighbors. Family traditions and church celebrations that have given us our most precious memories are suddenly abandoned and even laughed at as sentimental, magical, or superstitious. More than physical displacements, these inner mental and emotional displacements threaten us and give us feelings of being lost or left alone.

In our modern society with its increasing mobility and plurality, we have become the subjects and often the victims of so many displacements that it is very hard to keep a sense of rooted-

ness, and we are constantly tempted to become bitter and resentful. Our first and often most difficult task, therefore, is to allow these actual displacements to become places where we can hear God's call. It often seems easier to initiate a displacement that we ourselves can control than freely to accept and affirm a displacement that is totally out of our hands. The main question is, "How can I come to understand and experience God's caring actions in the concrete situation in which I find myself?" This question is difficult because it requires a careful look at the often painful events and experiences of the moment. "Where have I already been asked to leave my father and mother; where have I already been invited to let the dead bury the dead; where am I already challenged to keep my hand on the plow and not look back?" God is always active in our lives, always calling, always asking us to take up our crosses and follow. But do we see, feel, and recognize God's call, or do we keep waiting for that illusory moment when it will really happen? Displacement is not primarily something to do or to accomplish, but something to recognize.

In and through this recognition a conversion can take place, a conversion from involuntary displacement leading to resentment, bitterness, resignation, and apathy, to voluntary displacement that can become an expression of discipleship. We do not have to go after crosses, but we have to take up the crosses that have been ours all along. To follow Jesus, therefore, means first and foremost to discover in our daily lives God's unique vocation for us.

It is through the recognition of our displacement and the willingness to hear in it the first whispers of God's voice that we start forming community and living compassionate lives. Once we begin to experience our actual physical, mental, and emotional displacements as forms of discipleship and start to accept them in obedience, we become less defensive and no longer need to hide our pains and frustrations. Then what seemed a reason for shame

and embarrassment becomes instead the basis of community, and what seemed to separate us from others becomes the basis of compassion.

No Ordinary Citizens

To say that our main task is to discern God's call in the actual displacements of our lives does not imply passive resignation to sad, distressing, or unjust predicaments. On the contrary, it implies that we must look carefully at our situations in order to distinguish between constructive and destructive forces and discover where God is calling us. Careful attention to God's actions in our lives thus leads us to an even greater sensitivity to God's call. The more we are able to discern God's voice in the midst of our daily lives, the more we will be able to hear when God calls us to more drastic forms of displacement. Some of us are indeed called to move away from our cities and live in caves; some of us are indeed called to sell all we have, give it to the poor, and follow Christ in total poverty; some of us are indeed called to move away from our more familiar milieus and live with the sick and the dying; some are indeed called to join nonviolent communities of resistance, to protest loudly against social ills, to share in the misery of prisoners, the isolation of lepers, or the agony of the oppressed; some are even called to undergo torture and violent deaths. But no one will be able to hear or understand these very blessed calls if he or she has not recognized the smaller calls hidden in the hours of a regular day. Not everyone is called in the way St. Francis, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, Archbishop Romero, and Dom Helder Camera were called. But everyone must live with the deep conviction that God acts in her or his life in an equally unique way. No one should ever think that he or she is just an "ordinary citizen" in the Reign of God. As soon as we start taking our-

selves and God seriously and allow him to enter into a dialogue with us, we will discover that we also are asked to leave fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters and follow Jesus in obedience. Quite often we will discover that we are asked to follow to places we would rather not go. But when we have learned to respond to the small displacements of our daily lives, the greater call will not seem so great after all. We then will find the courage to follow him and be amazed by our freedom to do so.

Thus, voluntary displacement is part of the life of each Christian. It leads away from the ordinary and proper places, whether this is noticed by others or not; it leads to a recognition of each other as fellow travelers on the road, and thus creates community. Finally, voluntary displacement leads to compassion; by bringing us closer to our own brokenness it opens our eyes to our fellow human beings, who seek our consolation and comfort.