



Reflection from Fr. Garry

When people come to me for counseling, they often describe the pain they are in, and are searching for a way out of it. It may be the pain of marital problems, divorce, addiction of some kind, loss of a loved one, etc. As a novice counselor, I saw my job primarily as helping the person find ways out of the pain. So in counseling I would very quickly move to problem solving with them. I soon found out that people were open to solutions I might suggest only after they were convinced that I really understood the pain they were going through. I had to rethink my whole approach to counseling. I began to simply sit with a new client as they described their pain, sometimes over and over, till they were satisfied that I really understood. This would involve, among other things, my describing their pain in my own words, which helped them know I understood. I learned that only then will people consider anything I might have to offer in the way of problem solving.

We have many problems in our society which are causing much collective pain. We tend to address this with problem solving, especially with telling those "other people" what they need to do to shape up and not cause problems. The fact that we are so polarized as a society and as a world should be evidence enough that this strategy does not work. Yet we seem to be stuck in this way of approaching each other, apparently thinking it might eventually work. As the saying goes, insanity is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different results.

If we want to solve our problems as a society, we first have to spend time listening to and understanding the depth of pain that people are experiencing. Jesus did this when he would get to know people labeled sinners, often at dinner, before he would say anything about how they might solve the problem of sinning. Just think what could happen if lawmakers and elected officials spent time hearing and really understanding the pain of a single mother on WIC trying to work two jobs for example, or a refugee fleeing their country to save the lives of their children. Not only would this create mutual trust, but it would help everyone find more effective solutions to the problems that create pain for individuals and for society.

Of course we change society by each of us doing what we want society to do. Maybe the next time we feel the need to tell someone what the solution to their problem is, we can first take a little time to listen and understand more fully. Then both people can more easily find a solution.

~ Peace,

Fr. Garry