

To Transform Human Relations

I arrive at Francis' house. My visit is inopportune. He has just got into a fit of rage, he is red-faced, agitated, nervous, stamping his feet. He is attempting to calm himself, to get a grip on himself, in order to be modestly polite. Embarrassed, I dare not ask questions. After a few moments of silence, he says to me:

"Are you capable of understanding the youth of today? With the best of intentions, I made a few observations to my eldest son who is 16 years old. I felt that he was fuming inside; nevertheless, I addressed myself to him with my normal tone of voice. I admit that I am not tender and warm-hearted with the children or with teenagers, but just the same I am a father, I have responsibilities; it is not always easy to be so caring as to enter into dialogue. After one of my observations, which I believed to be judicious, Junior exploded; he covered me with reproaches and, banging the doors, he left for school. He insulted me, and shouted that I never understood my children and that I will never understand them."

Francis was striving to calm himself, but he was deeply troubled.

"You have come at an inopportune moment," he said to me. "It is the first time that Junior has thus abused me; he gave expression to the fulminations of his companions against our generation... He told me: 'You are superficial, nothing more; you take the laws seriously and with trickery you are able to circumvent them. You use the laws as a crutch. You live by conventions that have been imposed for generations. You are incapable of real depth. You follow the crowd. You are like sheep. You save face and you get the impression that you dazzle us. And you have the presumption to model us in your own image.'

"He added yet again: 'You are a selfish; deep down you have no regard for others, but only for yourself.' I listened at first with astonishment and with a modicum of patience, imagining that my son was passing a verdict not on his father but on my generation; moreover, I believed myself to be the natural exception. I, therefore, wished to help him see the nuances by telling him that he lacked the maturity to make a valid judgement.

"He exploded, he advanced towards me with clenched fists, he glared at me while crying: 'Dad, you are superficial, a sheep, a man without integrity, a hypocrite, you're living a lie. You have grovelled for years at the feet of your employers, and that has earned you financial stability. You lack real personality; you have not developed even a fifth of your talents, you remain an adolescent, a docile

boy without a backbone, unimaginative, ready to swallow all that is served to him. If you have become a supervisor in a small company it is because you are not strong enough to be a hindrance to anyone. Every company tolerates a certain number of incompetent people. I would rather wash windows and be myself than a follower by profession and a puppet by vocation."

It was not possible for me to pursue this conversation with Francis. We parted company with our hearts full of grief. I asked myself many a time afterwards how will Francis regain his son's trust?

Several months later, I saw Francis again; he was completely calm and very relaxed. During the course of the conversation, he spoke to me once again of Junior. He was aggressive no more. After several weeks of reflection, he had established a valuable dialogue with his son.

Junior, on his return from school, even had the good grace to apologize to his father for losing his temper and speaking rashly. Since that day, Francis was preoccupied. He read books on the education of youth; he spoke with educators, with psychologists, with priests; he was searching for a truth difficult to comprehend. Perhaps he was saying that Junior was not completely wrong.

"It is possible that I am but a follower, that I lack the personality of a leader, that I have not developed all my talents. I could have been better than what I am. It appears to me that had I been other

than what I am, my children could have been closer to me. My wife tries to resurrect my courage, but she treats me with pity and I emerge more bruised. To my chagrin, I cannot live without the trust of my own kith and kin.

"It is never too late to reflect. My son has been harsh, over-reacting, but his anger was perhaps not unprovoked. There is something to be changed in me, I feel it deeply. Since that unfortunate day, I listen more, I speak less. I attempt to be gentle with the children, to be understanding; my attitude towards my employers and my friends has also undergone a change. I try to benefit from this incident and I plumb the depths of my soul to discover what I feel and what I am.

"The children, my wife, my friends find that I have changed a great deal. I must admit that when I analyse myself, I find three immediate causes for this transformation of my relationships with others:

- I am more open to others;
- I am developing within myself a sincere respect for others;
- Finally, I make no exception, I eagerly accept whoever crosses my path without setting down conditions."

To Know How to Listen

To open myself to others is to develop in myself a new skill, that of plumbing the depths of the other's being, of standing in his or her shoes. More and more I understand the numerous causes of impediments to human relations. I must go behind the facade.

"I admit," continues Francis, "that my tone of voice was incisive, aggressive, on all occasions that I encountered my son alone. I have analysed myself, and I have found that the cause of my aggressiveness lay in the behaviour of my son.

"What is it in my son which has so riled me for nearly a year? I do not like dishevelled long hair, often dirty, which reaches down to his shoulders. I do not like the down which thinly covers his neck and chin. I do not like his slovenly appearance, the jangling trinkets on his arms, the fetishes that adorn his neck. I hate to see him sitting on the floor. It has even crossed my mind that he might have been drugged and that his moral values were in doubt. On every occasion that I saw him at the table, my pride was piqued, I was humiliated in the presence of my guests, and acted superior because of my white cuffs, my immaculate shirt and my

well-tied ties, and I picked on him with a morbid aggressiveness, I became stiff, intransigent, just in order to educate him, mind you!

"For myself, I have not been raised in this fashion. My parents, of a genteel breed, would never have tolerated such slovenliness. I felt in my gut that I had to change avoid severing my relationship with my children altogether. It is I who had to change. I had to cease to expect my advice to be followed just like the laws of nature.

"Some psychologists spoke to me of empathy, of openness to others, of acceptance of others, of putting myself in their shoes before I pass judgement. I was looking for examples, and one day, my second son, Mark, 14 years old, commented on the attitude of Christ with regard to Zaccheus. Mark was struck by an explanation by the chaplain of his school, a serious, modern and progressive young priest, whom we entertain from time to time in our home.

"Zaccheus was rich and was not liked by the poor. He was a Publican and had the reputation of being dishonest. He was of short stature and quite curious, and had many behavioural attitudes which set up barriers between him and the disciples of Jesus. Zaccheus had heard about a wonder-worker, a miracle worker, a formidable type of person, an object of curiosity for the crowds. Zaccheus had decided to go and meet Jesus, at least to see him, to form some sort of an idea of Jesus so

that he, himself, may be able to talk about Jesus, as a young man who feels attracted toward a film whose advertisement has aroused his curiosity. In spite of his behavioural attitudes, Zaccheus is transparent to Jesus; it matters not whether Zaccheus be rich, dishonest, minimally congenial, curious as a weasel in the midst of a group of pious people; Zaccheus wishes to see Jesus. Jesus opens himself up to Zaccheus; he has detected him within the branches of a tree; he calls him by name, he invites himself to a meal at his home. Zaccheus is loved for himself, in spite of appearances; he becomes a friend, he is ready to turn his life around and be honest and a friend of the poor. (cf. Luke 19:1-10)

"Zaccheus has helped me greatly and from that day on I have read passages of the Bible never losing sight of the education of my own children and the winning of their trust. I began to read in daily events the lessons which could help me to change. So, without the least effort, as if everything came naturally, I have avoided passing judgement or condemnation, I have striven to discover the positive aspects of my own family. Behind their facade, I have discovered their qualities, the seriousness of their personality, some of the motives that make them go on. I have realized that the difficult problem of understanding a 16-year-old son is not a new experience.

"In reality, it is love of myself and of my children which impels me to combat my egoism. We easily get accustomed to our own way of living and we find an excuse at every turn to defend our behaviour even if such behaviour is impulsive or simply egotistical. Without realizing it, we live in our own little worlds which we are always ready to defend, albeit to the detriment of our personalities. I have had enough of life's experiences to be able to appreciate the way of life which presents itself to me. The attitude of my son has forced a change upon me and, since then, I attempt to know him, to understand, to leave him a certain freedom of action, and I recognize him as my son as I gradually stumble upon those of his tendencies and qualities that fairly reflect those attributes which well up from the depths of my being.

"During the past few days, my son had posed certain questions to which I did not have ready-made answers. I listened to him and to myself to discover the resonances common to our beings, our lives, our experiences and our emotions. Together, we have accomplished this by dint of perseverance in heeding, discussing and sharing. We eliminate ready-made judgements. We try to overcome prejudices imposed by society as indispensable recipes.

"We discover in each other personal capacities of thought, of abilities to plan. Yesterday, I grew

thoughtful when Junior said to me: 'Father, you have changed a lot, I find you are terrific.' I had, however, only approved of him. He had told me: 'The cinema in Quebec is rubbish.' I responded: It is the product of a confused group of people. This situation cannot endure. These producers will sink into oblivion; others, more serious, will take their place; the newcomers will profit from the experiences of their predecessors!

"Dad, I have taken drugs, I have been happy, I made a good trip to fantasy land but I had a heavy heart, I had the impression that I was escaping from myself and that I would end up losing sight of myself. Also, I am finished with drugs, I want to be realistic, I wish to grasp all the opportunities of knowing myself, of being true to myself, of being able to communicate with others.' I refrained from further comment. I was content with saying to him: My child, experience enriches upright people who are not afraid of facing themselves.

"Why has he found me terrific? I did not condemn him, I had lost my aggressive tone of voice. I did not teach him a lesson, I left him to himself, but now I feel he has access to me just as I have access to him and I feel a presentiment that soon, despite the difference in our age and mentality, I will not only regain my son but also I will acquire a friend, as well as all the authority I thought I had lost, and which I had defended with a certain arrogance and domineering attitude."

Shared Responsibility in Education

Let us continue to follow Francis in the quest of himself.

"The atmosphere at home is relaxed. I have discovered that the responsibility of educating the members of my family rests with each one of us. Hitherto, I believed that I, myself, was the representative of the eternal Father in my home; I was sensitive on the subject of prestige and authority. When I spoke, I was demanding without realizing that my listeners had but one privilege, that of holding their peace, of obeying, of executing and of reforming themselves without reflection. I was in the process of setting up my own edifice of egoism and pride, I was emptying others of all personal initiative and was attempting to mould them in my own image. I had by force of habit unconsciously settled into complacency.

"The meditation on the Bible and, above all, the Gospels has overturned my mode of judgement, and my way of thinking has become more human and more flexible. I have clearly discovered that human beings should to be respected for themselves regardless of their behaviour, or of certain isolated acts by which they express themselves. Each rational human being has the mission of being

responsible for himself, of being faithful to himself if he does not wish to pollute the water of his life and the designs that God has upon him.

"At first, like so many others, I wished to find a solution to my own problems myself. I almost felt a sense of repugnance about applying my Christian values because my children called them into question. I felt so often at a loss and disconcerted that I had searched everywhere, for a way to overcome the barrier that was distancing me from my loved ones. The Gospel is a formidable book of experimental psychology. It is unfortunate that I made this discovery so late in my life.

"Jesus is a man of nature, his philosophy is marvellously lucid, and his understanding of human nature is exceptional. The respect he has for others is obvious.

"People wish that he condemn a woman of loose morals. This unfortunate woman is having continued relations with a married man. Some Pharisees, having knowledge of it, bring her to Jesus. They expect Jesus to pass judgement. The Romans, dominating the Jews, deprive them of the privilege of their own laws. They must submit to the new political regime. Therefore, they do not have the right to set up their own court of law. They must refer all matters to their masters. Moreover, the Pharisees know the prophet Jesus, his affection for the Jewish people, his popularity with the common folk. They, therefore, take the risk of making

him pass judgement on a woman taken in adultery. The Jewish law demands the stoning of such a woman to death; the Romans forbid it. If he says: 'Stone this woman,' Jesus will be a prisoner of the Romans within 24 hours and will have to defend himself against the accusation of premeditated murder. If he says: 'Refer the matter to the Romans and carry out their judgement,' all the Jewish dissidents, who foment a revolution to liberate themselves from the Roman yoke, will treat him as a renegade, a false brother, a traitor, and a deserter. And, who is not aware of the rich vocabulary of the Jews who have already accused Jesus of being a profligate, a seducer of the people, and even a prince of demons?

"First of all, Jesus has respect for people. He does not condone the sin of this woman, but invites all those accusers, who are sure that they have never sinned, to cast the first stone. All withdraw without even a glance at this woman, starting with the oldest and the most experienced of them. Jesus, full of respect, looks at the retreating mob and says to the woman who is deeply embarrassed: 'Woman, has no one condemned you? Neither will I. Go and be prudent, sin no more.' After such a reflection, I am resolved not to pass judgement any more, not to condemn, but to respect and help others regardless of their conduct.

"A shining example of respect for another is the father of the prodigal son. A father has two sons of

different temperaments. The younger is at the height of the crisis of his desire for independence. He wishes to leave his family in order to savour what he calls *freedom*. He demands of his father his share of his inheritance; he claims it in the name of justice. The father, neither being able to change his son's heart nor being able to reason with him, decides to defer to every one of his desires. The disquieted young man wastes his inheritance, courts prostitutes and totally ruins himself. A famine breaks out in the land and, one day, he finds himself in the mire of a pig sty. He decides to go back to his father... in his rags, exhausted, weak, haggard, unrecognizable. His father recognizes him, embraces him, and covers him with kisses... 'My son who was dead has come back to life...'

"Love works miracles. Respect is an attitude which opens the doors to true love. Here is respect for others: whatever be the conduct of the young man, beyond it all, the father sees his son, flesh of his own flesh, blood of his own blood..." (cf. Luke 15:11-32)

Francis continues with his reflections:

"Every day I have occasion to discover the blessing, for me personally, of learning how to respect others. I have understood that the need to be loved is inherent in human nature and such love is found in people themselves, but not in their attire.

"I have lived a long time with a silver spoon in my mouth avoiding questioning myself. I functioned as others did, I was simply following, partaking of ready-made joys offered to me, partaking also of the pain for which I believed I was not responsible. Having no thoughts of my own, I used to agree in principle with those who inveighed against the flippancy of our youth, also with those who were optimistic enough to discover the good in youth. Today, in the same measure that I have confidence in myself, I see my confidence in others grow... This is life!

"Hitherto, I was alone, I felt lonely and I compelled others to come to me saying to them that each one of them was my responsibility, and I suffered without being able to find a remedy. I felt as if there were two opposing factions: on the one hand, me and my good counsels, the assertion of my rights, my authority, the shouldering of my responsibilities and, on the other, those others around me who play me false, who oppose me, who make my life unbearable, those who make me impatient and unhappy. Since I go to them, they come to me and I have the impression that we are all on the same side, that we uphold the same values. Consequently, I am resolved to live and let live, to love and to be loved in return: I do not ignore the fact that such a life can be demanding, but this reality has its own rewards."