

FROM SOCIAL VULNERABILITY TO WIDESPREAD RELATIONSHIPS: THE CULTURE OF GIFT



People today are faced with many problems and uncertainties due to the profound changes taking place at every level of society. Waves of migrants, recurring economic crises, and the effects of globalization are leaving more and more human beings in precarious economic and social conditions that, paradoxically, are proper to a social context that promises individuals new ways of attaining self-realization.

As Ulrich Beck underscores: "We find ourselves at a fundamental turning point: one that separates the classic industrial society from today's 'high-risk society'—a society in which the terms *unemployment* and *poverty* are less and less applicable to a single group; indeed, they tend to be transversal phenomena linked to the individual stages of life."¹ Consequently, people can find themselves in situations of vulnerability—some clearly evident, others less so—that are giving rise to new forms of poverty and to disadvantages that the traditional welfare system cannot remedy. This context in which "personal life stories are at risk"² is generating new ways of expressing commitment, reciprocity and solidarity: ways that begin at the grass-roots level to construct networks of mutual help or volunteer service to benefit others.

In particular, new forms of relating to others are emerging:

Going beyond individualism, a widespread way of relating to others [is emerging] that extends to various levels of society and is incorporated into the basic fabric of daily life. It does not concern a return to traditional forms of solidarity but rather a redefinition of multiple modes of participation suited to the needs, role and function of the individual with respect to the collectivity to which he/she belongs. [...] It concerns widespread relational mechanisms—acts that give rise to spontaneous forms of aggregation and

convergence with regard to problems and events that trigger collective reactions. [...] Therefore, [it concerns] many-sided relational structures that...in substance sketch out tomorrow's architecture of communication, in which active, pro-active and socially responsible individuals feel at home."³



The social sciences have rediscovered the time-honored "economy of gift,"⁴ in contrast to today's "market place economy," as a fundamental and possible alternative in social relations—one characteristic of the non-profit world and of volunteer services in particular. It concerns establishing relationship networks based on altruism, trust and mutual exchange that give rise to a mentality of gift: one of the most pressing pleas of contemporary society:

In an increasingly complex context, characterized by the strong risk of de-socialization and global isolation, the demand is becoming more acute for meaningful communication and relations in which certain words in society's vocabulary (trust, reputation, gift, exchange, knowledge, responsibility) are reacquiring their full meaning. These "virtues" of civil society play a role in shaping the social and individual recomposition processes and influence the development of variegated ways of relating to one another...."⁵

This is the concept of supportive communication that Pope Francis is promoting first of all through his concrete behavior and then through his words and teachings.

Bruna Fregni, fsp

¹ U. Beck, *Costruire la propria vita*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2008, pp. 61, 64.

² *Ivi.*, p. 62.

³ B. Mazza and A. Volteranni, "Reti sociali e sensemaking: per una relazionalità diffusa," in M. Morcellini and B. Mazza (editors), *Oltre l'individualism, Comunicazione, nuovi diritti e capitale sociale*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2008, p. 15.

⁴ Cf. the analysis of R. Scarfi in "Il dono come raccordo," in M. Morcellini and B. Mazza (editors), *Oltre l'individualismo...*, cited above, pp. 65-70.

⁵ M. Morcellini, *Oltre l'individualismo*, *ivi.*, p. 11.