

As Christians we are called to create a community of radical inclusion



Sister Patty Fawkner SGS. Image: Sisters of the Good Samaritan.

A “preferential option for the other” is at the heart of the Gospel, and what it means to be Christian, while also offering a fresh way of thinking about love, writes Patty Fawkner SGS.

Perhaps you’ve had the experience of coming across a phrase or quote which pulls you up and sets you thinking. Consider, for example, “Love means never having to say you’re sorry (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_means_never_having_to_say_you're_sorry)” or “The nag named Self-interest always runs a good race (<https://www.smh.com.au/national/gough-whitlam-dead-his-memorable-quotes-20141021-1193jd.html>)”.

On a recent Zoom session on Interculturality I encountered the phrase “preferential option for the other”. I was familiar with the notion of “preferential option for the poor”, a key tenet of Catholic Social Teaching, but had never heard of “preferential option for the other”, and neither had Google so it seems when I did a search!

I contacted the presenter and discovered that the phrase was coined by missionary anthropologist Anthony Gittins in his book *Living Mission Interculturally* (<https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol10/iss10/22/>). Gittins builds on the notion of “option for the other in their otherness” developed by German theologian Johann Metz.

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Caring for the foreigner and stranger – the “other” – is a basic tenet of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

The Hebrew people are constantly reminded that they who were once strangers in a foreign land, now have an obligation to generously welcome the stranger (*Deut* 10:17-19). And Jesus invites his followers to be neighbour to any stranger or foreign other in the

parable of the Good Samaritan.

Christian theology asks us to see Christ *in* the stranger: "I was a stranger and you invited me in". You did this whenever you did it for another (*Matt* 25: 35, 40). However, Gittins says that there is more to Jesus' teaching in welcoming the stranger. "To show hospitality to the stranger is to identify the other as stranger and oneself as host – a position of superiority and control," he says.

Christian theology also invites us to see Christ *as* the stranger, the one "came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (*Jn* 1:11).

Recognising God as stranger to us, helps us resist the temptation to domesticate God, as St Augustine (<https://augustinisms.tumblr.com/post/184515094226/if-you-have-understood-then-this-is-not-god-if>) reminds us, "if we have understood – then what we have understood is not God."

God is always Gracious Mystery and Intimate Other.

While Gittens is specifically concerned with the "otherness" experienced in intercultural missionary communities, it occurs to me that a "preferential option for the other" has principled and pragmatic implications for any communal setting such as family, church, or workplace. Gittens says we experience community in three different ways: a community of invitation, a community of inclusion, and a community of radical welcome.

An example of a community of invitation is a country which welcomes migrants who are expected to fully assimilate and adopt the cultural norms of the host country. The onus is fully on invitees to adapt and change.

An invitation to be part of a community can be readily withdrawn if the invitees do not fully inculcate the cultural norms of the host; non-conformism will result in marginalisation.

Of course, some people will never be invited to join a particular community, because "we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come (<https://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/2001-john-howard#:~:text=It's%20about%20this%20nation%20saying,circumstances%20in%20which%20they%20come>)," and if you come by boat, the invitation will never be yours.

A community of inclusion may honour diversity and, in terms of the Australian community, be committed to multiculturalism. In practice, however, the norms of the dominant culture prevail.

Whoever is not mainstream can be forced out eventually.

I heard a story of an international student from Saudi Arabia who studied in the US. Having finished his studies, the student visited the program co-ordinator and handed her a locked suitcase and key. The student said that he was going back to Saudi Arabia later that day and he wanted the co-ordinator to open the suitcase after he had left.

Opening the case later, the co-ordinator was shocked and saddened to find that the case was filled with Saudi Arabian gifts which the student planned to give when he was invited into an American home. During the five years of his studies, he never received one invitation!

A further heartbreaking example occurred recently on the Ukraine/Poland border, where it was reported (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/mar/02/people-of-colour-fleeing-ukraine-attacked-by-polish-nationalists>) that people of colour were denied the right to cross to safety. Polish officials have denied this (<https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/02/28/poland-condemns-fake-news-that-it-is-turning-away-non-white-people-fleeing-ukraine/>) as “fake news”.

There are always lines in the sand in communities of invitation and inclusion. You are included if

Any minority group lives under a cloud of potential exclusion.

Fr Ronald Rolheiser OMI says (<https://www.omiusa.org/index.php/2021/01/10/welcoming-the-stranger/>) that “For all sorts of pragmatic reasons, political, social, economic, and security, we can perhaps justify not welcoming the stranger; but we can never justify this on Christian grounds.”

Gittins’ third type of community is a community of radical welcome where each is host and each is “other”. I realise that if I am mutually open to the “other” and enter their world, my world will inevitably change. The burden of change, of conversion, rests on all members of the community.

What might a community of radical inclusion look like? Writing in the 6th Century, St Benedict gives us some descriptors. In chapter 72, the penultimate chapter of his Rule, Benedict is at his most inspired. Members of the community, he says:

“should each try to be the first to show respect to the other, supporting with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behaviour, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else.” (Rule of Benedict 72:4-7)

If I wish to create a community of radical inclusion, I must embark on a journey of conversion which is a pathway of love.

How would it be if I thought of love as a “preferential option for the other”? True love is beyond infatuation and beyond romanticism. True love requires a de-centering of myself and my own preference. As Liberation Theologian Gustavo Gutierrez says (<https://www.jcrelations.net/articles/article/levinas-and-the-other-side-of-theology.html>), rediscovering the other means moving beyond a “world on inward-looking absorption with self” and entering into the world of the other.

This is truly radical and truly an ideal presented to us by Jesus. How can I live up to this ideal? I can't on my own. I am only able to have a preferential for the other, because of the grace which flows from the Eternal Word who "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (*Phil 2:7*) for us. Perhaps I can live up to the ideal by preferencing one other at a time.

A "preferential option for the other" is the hallmark of a community of radical inclusion. In such a community, love will always mean saying sorry. In such a community, sure, I will back Self-interest, but equally and mutually, I will back the interest of the "other".

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