

Common House?

Tjeu van Knippenberg, CM, and Peter Reijers

Tjeu: Good morning! Thank you so much for being invited here. For Peter and me it is an honour to make a contribution to the theme of this Vincentian Symposium on *Welcoming the Stranger*. Both of us are involved in the Vincent de Paul Center, The Netherlands, center for social spirituality.

My fellow speaker is Peter Reijers, a business consultant and coach, mainly active in the field of communication skills, often in building companies, in the field of construction. He knows about buildings and houses. The title of our contribution is “common house?”— question mark.

Peter: Tjeu van Knippenberg is a priest of the Congregation of the Mission and professor emeritus of practical theology at Tilburg University. Nowadays he works in the field of spiritual guidance; he leads retreats and lectures all over the world. He will approach our theme from a biblical, Vincentian, and experiential perspective.

I never realised that, being a layman, I am your main target group, as I learned recently. I was surprised and honoured! My approach will be from the angle of the present corporate world, more specifically: the Dutch corporate world. Vincent would have been quite popular there, no doubt.

Tjeu: In our presentation, we want to contribute to understanding the theme *Welcoming the Stranger*. In today’s world, it can be observed that the arrival of refugees raises different responses.

In our country, The Netherlands, there are various positive, as well as negative, responses to Pope Francis' message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees in August 2017. He calls us to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate refugees.

For Pope Francis this attitude and behaviour are in accordance with the overreaching goal of his encyclical, *Laudato si'*. This goal is: "to build an integrative and sustainable common house for everyone."

Peter: If that is the goal, it poses this question: how do we build an integrative and sustainable common house for everyone? Is it possible in our global, multicultural world?

A common house presupposes a certain degree of familiarity and mutual agreement. How do strangers fit in such a home? Because, in our understanding "strange" can be foreign, alien, odd, funny, peculiar, curious, weird, quaint, or singular.

All these possible meanings of "strange" are an indication that the stranger belongs to a different order. He does not belong to the world we have built up in our familiar environment.

How can the Pope's dream come true: old and new people integrating in a common house?

Tjeu: Let us investigate this question, first of all by looking at the Bible. We see that the relation to the stranger, even in the Bible, is an ambivalent one. A common house?

On the one hand, the LORD God is only there for Israel, the chosen people with its own land, language, and rituals. On the other hand, how can other peoples be saved? The attitude towards the stranger is an ambivalent one. In this ambivalence, God calls the people to keep alive the memory that they themselves were foreigners and strangers in Egypt.

Leviticus 19:33-34: "When an alien resides with you in your land, do not mistreat such a one. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the LORD, am your God." Exodus is a call to go to our destination. With the same urge, the spiritual sings, *When Israel was in Egypt's land: let my people go.*

Because the people wanted to be free – no more slaves, no more fleshpots, but from slavery to freedom, from unconsciousness to consciousness, from selfishness to love, from ruling to serving. Return as a people and as an individual to your own history. Remember, Israel. Go back to your innermost self and see how it is to be a stranger and to be welcomed in a common house.

Peter: Now, please allow me to share some thoughts connecting the dots between this, and my country and my working field. You all may know our image: "in matters of money, the fault of the Dutch is giving too little and asking too much." I hope it does not apply to all of my countrymen all the time, but still... Platitudes sometimes have a reason for being there.

The Dutch moved on, from exploiting slaves (we also invented apartheid, not something of which to be proud) to being a country that has a solid place in the ranking of the happiest countries in the world. Year after year, we are in the top ten. Consider this: Holland is the only country in the world without stray dogs. We are, let us say, organized. Our building has a solid foundation. Maybe as strong as the foundation of the Vincentian Charism? Let others be the judge of that.

But will all this welcome strangers? Will it solve the problem of poverty? We have no stray dogs, but we certainly have poverty. How can original residents and strangers get a shared house? Dealing with

strangers is not easy, not only in The Netherlands. Look at political negotiations on quotas; the fear of being under the foot of Muslims. Beneath the surface of acting, it is a matter of courage and fear, of trust and mistrust.

Tjeu: Yes, it is all ambivalent. Ambivalence is the simultaneous presence of opposite feelings.

As an example, I would like to invite you to look at the story of Vincent de Paul when he was a young man in 17th-century French society. He had been a guardian of pigs and sheep. As a young man, he went from the countryside to school in the city of Dax. He experienced what it is to be alien, odd, curious. Look at a story he later told. "My father came to visit me. I was ashamed of my badly dressed father."

Vincent and his father: a common house? Through this experience, he was pulled back and forth between feelings of shame and love. His family, the first poor in his life. He felt ashamed as well as responsible for them.

He experienced in himself the ambivalence of feelings of reserve and approach to people who live on the periphery of society. It was not without struggle that he was able to handle his different feelings. He learned to hold up the ambivalence as a part of his existence.

Peter: In a special way, we can see this ambivalence in the Folleville church. As you know, it is the church where Vincent preached his famous sermon, on 25 January 400 years ago, to invite people to liberate themselves from the burden of fear and anxiety by a general confession. When I, being a builder, look at the picture of the Folleville church, I immediately see some remarkable features in the architecture of the building.

From the outside, there is a higher part with bigger windows and a lower part with smaller windows. From the inside there is a rich part and a modest one. The choir is richly and beautifully ornamented. The nave of the church with its wooden ceiling is simple.

I learned that the rich part of the church was added around 1513 with the arrival of the “Seigneurs,” the nobles. The little village church, for ordinary people, is from an earlier date. Both parts of the church have different names: the modest part is named Saint Jacques le Majeur [Saint James the Greater] and the rich part is called Saint Jean Baptiste [Saint John the Baptist].

Tjeu: The architecture of this Folleville church was very symbolic for Vincent. Looking at the images of the poor and the rich part of this church, you can hardly believe that these two parts belong together.

Vincent had the ability of dealing with this ambivalence. He had competence for uniting what is separated. He connected rich and poor, high and low, city and countryside, religion and society.

It is this “two-sided church” that plays such an important role in the start of his charismatic work. In this, we recognise the remarkable ability of linking, of connecting what should be together. In this church, he learned once more to see people as fundamentally equal creatures.

Later on, his charism of mission developed into prophetic courage. Throughout his life, he saw the countless refugees who came to Paris as strangers from areas of war and he proceeded to act. He received the charism of charity: becoming an icon of social commitment in receiving them and developing conditions for living.

Peter: The corporate world would admire Vincent's advice: "Make no small plans!" as I learned in a course on Vincentian leadership. No need here to explain Vincent's conviction of the values of the Christian tradition. You are probably very much aware of that, as you are of his practical ambitions, I would think.

Maybe we should reconsider helping in the way we want – and always wanted – to help. Maybe we should consider helping in the way "the stranger" would like to be helped. Of course, we all know that people do not always think what we think they think. Let us think about that. Let us not speculate about things that we can be certain of by simply asking and then by really listening to the answers to our questions. Not by listening to be understood, but by listening to understand. A lack of flexibility, of willingness to change when needed, of true interest in others, of motivation to do good in the eyes of others can be seen as a persistent kind of poverty, with unintended consequences, maybe even with the disappointment of a lack of gratitude.

Some months ago, I fell and my ankle was injured. I had to walk with crutches. Being a "real man," I looked forward to stretching my time of "suffering" as long as I possibly could. You know men.

I asked advice from my doctor. Not from anybody else. But I got a lot of unsolicited advice. And I mean a lot... And all the advice contradicted all the other advice... I did not feel helped at all. I felt like a temporary stranger.

Tjeu: Once again, dealing with strangers is not easy. This concerns the stranger in ourselves, as well as the stranger from outside.

We know it and we experience it in closed hearts and borders. What is the challenge of the inner connection of mission/charity today towards refugees and strangers? It is the challenge to work with the opposite feelings of staying away from and being attracted by the stranger.

We can learn it from the meaning of the Greek word “xenos.” It means both stranger and guest. Stranger refers to being different, guest refers to looking for commonality. The one side stands for keeping to yourself, constructing a sheltered world. The other side refers to openness, learning something new.

This tension is at work wherever people live. The answer is in the virtue of hospitality, already known by Abraham. Without hospitality towards the three young men visiting him, he would have missed the voice of God calling him.

Peter: How can we contribute to building up the contact between strange and familiar, understanding each other in our pluralism?

We see signs of it in today’s world, parables that can address the challenge of the difference and that can inspire to live in harmony.

Which confronts us, looking for solutions, once again with the question: Is it possible? So far, not always so good... Maybe we should reconsider our points of view; maybe we should keep the value of our traditions, but start handing over the flame, instead of the ashes.

Can we truly accept the idea that “the stranger” may know things that we do not know, the idea that the stranger may be right? Can the stranger teach us – or does he already teach and help us by moving and challenging our steady habits?

Tjeu: An important example is the answer Pope Francis gives to serious problems of our time. His spirit is similar to Vincentian spirituality.

You can see this when you look at mission and charity. The Vincentian Charism of mission is expressed in *Evangelii gaudium*. The Vincentian Charism of charity is expressed in *Laudato si’*. Two encyclicals, two sides of the same building. In that sense, we learn about the opportunity of a common house.

Peter: If we decide that it is our responsibility to act upon all that, wherever we can, and to inspire others, we may well be on our way to a Vincentian method.

Maybe we will never fully solve the problem of poverty, fully and effectively face the challenge of welcoming the stranger. Maybe we will learn from the poor, and the stranger, how to be better at it. Maybe Vincent would be seen as a stranger by some. What a wonderful opportunity to reconsider how we look at strangers.

Let us investigate, not judge. After all, only then will he inspire us all to make no small plans, to be pragmatic and effective, to be a movement, and not an institution. An institution, if it wants to stay alive, must be moved from within.

Every house has an outside and an inside. This also applies to a common house. As Vincentian Family in The Netherlands we want, in cooperation with others, to contribute to the Pope's policy. We want to do this in the way of the famous Vincentian Charism.

Tjeu: This charism is the way of mission and charity together. Charity without mission is like a body without a soul. In The Netherlands, and in the whole Western world, we have to emphasize mission, that is the inside of the common house. The basis for doing so comes up in remembering the exodus history of Israel and the son-father story of Vincent de Paul.

These events teach us that a conversion to the stranger takes place by being conscious of the stranger in ourselves. This consciousness may lead us on the way of prophetic courage and social commitment.

In the Western world, we have to remember the challenge of Folleville as the basis of charity, the inside of a common house. For Vincent mission was a three-sided operation. The advice to his missionaries when they went to preach a mission was: 1. bring

knowledge to the people; 2. let them make a general confession; 3. organise charities. Three elements, three dimensions belonging together: evangelizing – liberating – serving. In the middle is liberating. Vincent experienced this in the confession of an anguished man. We can do nothing if there is not a new spirit of liberty in us. This new spirit and the quality of the inside are emphasised by Jesus when he says to his disciple Peter, “once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32). One condition for helping: when you have come to yourself...

Peter: In the corporate world, the companies that survive are quite often the companies that focus on the needs and wishes of their clients and act upon that focus in a way that their clients value.

Maybe our “added value” has little meaning, if it is not perceived as “recognized value” by others. If we add only the value that we consider valuable, without verification of the values of the other, are we really helping?

Maybe we should consider verification before deciding which value should be added. Dialogue can lead to surprising insights. Ask, listen, choose together, and let us not forget to act. Do.

A Dutch marketer claims that vision without action is hallucination. The reverse is also true! Let us become more and more conscious of the fact that the interior of a house is as important as the exterior. Charity without mission may be seen as an added value, but not always as a recognized one.

Therefore, after 400 Vincentian years, our idea for the next 400 years is:

Let us think, ask, listen, learn, and act on our way to welcoming the stranger whenever and wherever we can!