

Adapted from “Solidarity, The Five Conversions” (Richard Rohr)

If one of the primary markers of a Christian life is *solidarity* as modelled by Jesus, I am afraid that most of us still have a long way to go. We are just taking our first toddling steps towards a more mature and embodied faith. Transformed teachers like Francis of Assisi, Dorothy Day, and countless others, both sainted and anonymous, have invited us into solidarity with the poor and oppressed. When we are comfortably centred, it is difficult to move to the margins, but that is where we must go!

About fifty years ago, a Brazilian educator named Paulo Freire (1921–1997) wrote a book titled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that challenges many of our preconceived ideas about Christian “charity,” “service,” and “mission.” Inspired by Paulo Freire’s work, I have developed a teaching that I call “The Five Conversions.” It can offer us a path toward a more authentic Christian life where we recognize our deep connections to each other and choose to live in solidarity with suffering. Solidarity begins by becoming aware of our own social location, which is our place in society. For me and most of my readers that place is a starting point of privilege within the dominant culture.



The First Conversion to solidarity is to have basic compassion for the poor in general, or one poor person. *I am using the word “poor” in a very specific way—those who are powerless, dismissed, or considered lesser in society. This is far larger than mere economic poverty.* Sadly, there seem to be many Christians who don't even have basic compassion for the poor. Far too many seem to think, even if to themselves, that if “those people” would simply work a little more, do things the right way, change their minds, stay hidden, or just “pray a little harder,” we'd all be better off. The first conversion is where we must begin. Our hearts must be softened, and we must experience basic sympathy, empathy, and recognition of another person's pain.

Imagine no possessions,
I wonder if you can,
No need for greed or hunger,
A brotherhood of man,
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world'

-John Lennon (Oct.9,1940 - Dec.8,1980)

The Second Conversion to solidarity is anger at the unjust situation that caused their poverty. Many people never reach this stage of anger at injustice. Cultural worship of individualism and “bootstrap” mentality deprives us of the capacity to empathize with people in need and recognize systemic oppression. When we are in the middle or upper tier of privilege, it is almost impossible to see the many ways the system helped us succeed. The dominant group—in any country or context—normally cannot see its own lies. We have to pay attention to whomever is saying “I can't breathe” to recognize the biases at work.

This often only changes when, through friendship with people of different backgrounds and life experiences, we witness mistreatment and marginalization. We get to know someone outside our immediate social circle. Our sister falls in love with someone from another race, religion, or culture. Our grandchild is transgender. We see all the ways life is more difficult for them than it needs to be. We feel their pain instead of standing apart at a safe distance. Anger is a necessary, appropriate, and useful response to this kind of injustice. It is the beginning of social critique and helps us protect the appropriate boundaries for ourselves and others. Yet anger can be dangerous when it hangs around too long, becoming self-defeating and egocentric, and distorting the message it came to offer us. We can become so intent on pointing out problems that we are never actually willing to be part of the solution. The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better, not more criticism! The question of true conversion and solidarity is, ***“how can I work through my anger and get to the other side, so I can be a life-giving presence with and for those who are most suffering?”***

For oppressed communities anger can be a form of survival, a necessary stage on the path towards healing. Listening to such anger with compassionate friendship can itself be a form of solidarity. In situations of systemic injustice inflicting generational abuse upon people and communities, anger as righteous indignation is appropriate, healthy, and necessary for survival and all peaceful methods of resistance are appropriate.**(to be continued)**

Elaine