

REFLECTION



The sacrament of presence

Elisabeth Öhlböck, from Belfast, reflects on the importance of being fully present for one another.

Most Saturday mornings I look forward to the video-call appointments with my 4½ year old niece Karolina, who lives in Austria. We read story-books, play hide and seek or engage in role-plays during which she places the phone on the deck-chair of her toy cruise-ship and we eat vanilla ice-cream together. The other day my niece wasn't feeling well and had a temperature. After some chatting, she put the mobile phone on the coffee-table beside her and lay down on the sofa. I had just finished telling her a story about Elsa and Anna, the two ice-princesses who had gone to rescue a rabbit in the snow, so I said: 'I think we might stop our video-call now and you rest a little.' Karolina answered: 'No, we shouldn't stop. Being together and talking helps me to get better.'

Like ships in the night

With her comment, Karolina made me think about a topic that's been in my heart for some time: the art of being truly present for one another. I often realise that in so many of our encounters, be it in our families, at work, while doing sport or shopping, we tend to relate to one another like ships in the night. Often, we barely notice each other, and if we do, only if something about the other person captures our interest. Yet, we all know that being acknowledged and valued for who we are, being cherished and loved is one of the most important factors for humans to grow and thrive. We are biologically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually hard-wired for connection. It's what we crave the most. We are social beings. We are made for one another.



It's often in the realm of social relationships that our greatest joys and our greatest hurts happen.

The art of being present

Personally, I have experienced many times how true presence deeply connects me to other people and how this connection in itself gives meaning to my life. One such encounter stands out to me in a special way. It was a while ago, when during a difficult time, I reached out

to a friend. Amidst talking and tears, my friend just sat there and mirrored my emotions, asked the occasional question and let me speak. By her physical presence, emotional connection and her words sparingly used, I sensed that she fully respected what I shared and deeply cared. After that chat, my situation hadn't changed outwardly – and yet – inside myself everything was different. I realised, that my friend, who hadn't tried to 'fix me' with well-meant advice or by talking about her own 'similar' experiences, had given me something



invaluable instead: the gift of herself in the form of her total presence and attention, which created a special, nearly sacred atmosphere between us. This experience made me take courage again.

An outward sign of an inward grace

I often wondered whether we could call this type of connection, where people are truly present to each other, a sacrament. Many Christian denominations hold to

the definition of 'sacrament' formulated by Augustine of Hippo: 'an outward sign of an inward grace that has been instituted by Jesus Christ'. Certainly Jesus, while he walked this earth, was always fully present to the people he met. He showed many a gesture of an outward sign which meant even more inwardly to the people who he encountered and healed. Thinking of my own experiences of giving and receiving presence, and of the changes that happen inside, I think the description 'outward sign of an inward grace', might fit.

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Tuning in to the other person

I think 'presence' with one another can get us to an experience of a glimpse of God's love amongst us. Didn't Jesus say 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst' (Mt. 18: 20)? Could we allow Jesus to be present amongst ourselves, wherever we gather, by attempting to be truly present to one another? I think we can, if we stop running and start looking at the person next to us without prejudice. We don't even need to wait for the big moments of sharing deep emotions, but can let it happen in every-day life, even during short or fleeting encounters. What matters is our attitude and our ability to be present with the person in front of us. I think it happens every time we transcend the distraction of our own thoughts and 'tune in' to the other person: when we acknowledge the cashier at the check-out, when we really listen to our co-worker, spouse or father-in-law instead of jumping in, when we get down on our knees and play super-heroes with our children, when we notice the awkward new colleague who has nobody to talk to in the staff room. In those moments we not only validate the other person and ourselves as beloved and cherished children of God, but a relationship between us is created that could be described as a sacrament, as God's tangible presence amongst us. 🍷

