



ACTING FOR A CULTURE OF LOVE

Recently the Australian media has been in a frenzy over an exposé on certain aspects of National Rugby League culture and the style of sexual behaviour that is generated in it. The exposé has unleashed a debate which has continued to be sensationalised, not without profit, it must be said, for the media itself. Whether listening to radio, reading newspapers or even sitting in cafes listening to nearby conversations, it has been impossible to avoid the reaction.

I do not want particularly to add to the endless commentary on the affair – a commentary which, personally, I am not convinced serves the public interest with much benefit, and which easily degenerates into a public voyeurism that, itself, demonstrates profound disrespect to the complexity of persons and the pain of the emotional wreckage the expose has strewn around. Further, sadly our own Catholic community is in no position to cast stones on other cultures in which abuse has been generated. Nonetheless, the events occasioned by the expose on an entire culture of sexual activity that we regard as morally wrong challenge each and every one of us with the full acknowledgement that behaviours have consequences. Rather than placing the whole affair at a distance from ourselves, the issue of professional sport and its sexualised culture with all the behaviours that inhere to it invites us to think about the effect that our behaviours have on each other. It has long been the wisdom of our Christian community to know that there is a form of sexual behaviour, for example, that leaves us feeling more humanized, and there are forms that leave us in the end feeling quite dehumanised whatever of their temporary pleasure. Even with the doctrinal formulation that we are given by our collective wisdom as a Christian community, our own personal experience teaches us this if we listen to it deeply and honestly enough.

What behaviours lead to life and which lead in the end to tragic unhappiness? This is the question underneath the chatter of the sensationalism about the exposé on sport and sex. It is also the very question over which Jesus agonises. In the gospel he gives the answer. Those actions toward others which are energised and permeated by love alone lead to happiness – those actions motivated by a fundamental respect of each other's dignity, beyond patterns of fear and defence, domination and submission, beyond need and satisfaction, beyond vengeance and retribution. And he goes further to claim, "When you act toward each other with the freedom of genuine love, I live in you."

How might we reflect on the possibility contained in these words? Recently, I was introduced to the African notion of *Ubuntu*. The notion of *Ubuntu* has a good deal to teach us how we might enter what Jesus invites us into by his command of love. It is a concept which also underscores those actions which lead to life fully alive and not to the experience of being the living dead. At the end of a confronting saga we might do well to commit ourselves to it anew.

So what is *Ubuntu*? Let me offer a marvellous commentary on it by Desmond Tutu of South Africa.

In my culture and tradition the highest praise that can be given to someone is . . . an acknowledgement that he or she has this wonderful quality, *ubuntu*. It is a reference to their actions towards their fellow human beings; it has to do with

how they regard people and how they see themselves within their intimate relationships, their familial relationships and within the broader community. *Ubuntu* addresses a central tenet of African philosophy: the essence of what it is to be human.

The definition of this concept has two parts. The first is that the person is friendly, hospitable, generous, caring and compassionate. In other words, someone who will use their strengths on behalf of others – the weak and the poor and the ill – and not take advantage of anyone. This person treats others as he or she would be treated. And because of this they express the second part of the concept which concerns openness, large-heartedness. They share their worth. In so doing, their humanity is recognized and becomes inextricably bound to theirs.

People with *ubuntu* are approachable and welcoming, their attitude is kindly and well disposed, they are not threatened by the goodness in others because their own esteem and self-worth is generated by knowing they belong to a greater whole. To recast the Cartesian proposition “I think, therefore I am”, *ubuntu* would phrase it, “I am human because I belong”. Put another way, “a person is a person through other people” . . . ¹

Ubuntu runs on the principle that if I diminish you, I diminish myself. Desmond Tutu remarks that the basis of this realisation lies in the sense of our deep inter-connection with each other. “We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity.”²

Nelson Mandela recounts how *Ubuntu* operates through the hospitality we offer one another – a concern that has the interests of the other at heart, rather than simply our own interests and satisfactions:

“ A traveler through a country would stop at a village and he didn't have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him. That is one aspect of Ubuntu but it will have various aspects. Ubuntu does not mean that people should not address [their own needs]. The question . . . is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve?³

In our discipleship of the Risen Jesus let us commit ourselves to this quality of Ubuntu. If our actions are characterized through and through with this quality then the culture which emerges will be one of love, a culture which bears the life of Jesus.

¹ Desmond Tutu, “Introduction,” in *Compassion: The words and inspiration of the Dalai Lama* (2008).

² Desmond Tutu, Speech, 2008, cited on “Ubuntu,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_\(philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_(philosophy))

³ Nelson Mandela, cited on “Ubuntu,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_\(philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_(philosophy))

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