

## Chapter 6

# The Journey to Beloved Sonship - the first step to belonging.

“Belonging starts with self-acceptance... Your level of belonging can never be greater than your level of self-acceptance.”

— Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*

In the first part of this book, we explored the concept of belonging in broad terms, seeking to understand its significance for young people today. By approaching the question-*Why does belonging matter, and what does it truly mean to belong?*, through a multidisciplinary lens, we laid a foundation for deeper reflection. In this second part, our focus shifts to the practical dimension: the *how* of belonging. Here, we examine the concrete dynamics that support a young person’s journey toward authentic and lasting belonging.

## 1. Every Personal Journey Starts with Me

Belonging is always aimed at the individual and represents a deeply personal journey. On their path to belonging, a young person passes through several stages – finding the right group, making friends, forming deeper connections with a few, discovering a shared purpose, and even shaping and contributing to a community. Inevitably, misunderstandings and hurt are part of every journey. While conflicts in toxic communities are a notable exception, tensions and disagreements are part of every meaningful journey of belonging. To this end, we must help young people work through them and not just flee at the sight of their first serious problem.

Therefore, even before belonging to a community, a young person must first journey to belong to himself/herself. Simply put, belonging to oneself is a journey to self-acceptance. A young person must journey to be secure in who they are and to realize that they are loved in the eyes of God. Only when they find security and belonging in themselves can they genuinely belong to a community. John Paul II’s landmark apostolic exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (I will give you shepherds), on the formation of Catholic priests, which continues to influence priestly formation today, emphasizes the importance of self-acceptance to give oneself to others.<sup>1</sup> Self-acceptance is essential for making our lives a gift to others and experiencing belonging.

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<sup>1</sup> This is an interpretation by the authors of John Paul II’s writings. The term “self-acceptance” is not mentioned specifically by John Paul II. John Paul II, “*Pastores Dabo Vobis: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day*” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, March 1992), paras. 21-23,43, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_25031992\\_pastores-dabo-vobis.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis.html).

## 2. Heart speaks to Heart

- **St. John Henry Newman.<sup>2</sup>**  
(Episcopal Motto chosen when elected as Cardinal)

Miriam, a youth mentor, recounts a conversation with a young woman named Lina who had once sought her guidance. Reflecting on Lina's journey, Miriam asked, "Your background is quite different from many others in the group. What helped you find your place in the community so naturally? "Lina paused for a moment before responding - "A long time ago, when I first approached you, I felt confused and troubled. I was quite withdrawn and struggled to connect with most others. Now, as I reflect on it, my first significant step was to find inner peace. This inner peace marked a significant shift in my relationship with God. Initially, your support helped me in that process. I trusted you because you listened to me without making any assumptions. You apologize when you make any incorrect assumptions. As I journeyed, I found you trustworthy, for your actions did not contradict what you said. Perhaps this growing trust led me to guide my journey of self-acceptance."

Like any young person, Lina had doubts about herself – her self-worth and self-image. These doubts regarding her self-worth stemmed from childhood experiences and interactions with others. However, what helped her on her journey toward self-acceptance and toward becoming a beloved daughter was another person who unconditionally accepted her, a person who saw her as a beloved, just as Christ does. Lina experienced being loved by another person. It was Miriam's heart to listen, accept, and have an open mind that brought Lina's guards down. She was able to see herself, who she is, from a totally new perspective – from the eyes of God.

Young people often have similar encounters at retreats or in Eucharistic Adoration, where, in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, they experience an overwhelming sense of being beloved in the eyes of God. The lies they have told themselves with regard to their self-worth or self-image are broken down in front of the Risen Christ. They can see themselves from a new perspective, through the eyes of Christ.

St. John Henry Newman's episcopal motto was *Cor ad cor loquitur -Heart speaks to Heart*. Drawing on St. Francis de Sales, Newman believed that our actions and our witness can be among the most effective ways to propagate the faith. St. John Bosco, who worked tirelessly with young people to educate and evangelize them, was a strong believer in speaking to a young person's heart, allowing them to experience the love of Christ within.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Brigitte Maria Hoegemann, "'Cor Ad Cor Loquitur' John Henry Cardinal Newman's Coat of Arms," *International Centre of Newman Friends* (blog), July 2, 2008,

<https://www.newmanfriendsinternational.org/en/cor-ad-cor-loquitur-john-henry-cardinal-newmans-coat-of-arms/>.

<sup>3</sup> John Bosco, "Letter to the Boys at Lanzo - *Epistolario Di Don Giovanni Bofirmo* say, can, n St. Francis de Sales, Newman believed that our actions and our witness can be amongsco, Vol. III," ed. Eugenio Cerio (Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, January 1876).

*Our witness and interaction, accepting young people, listening to them, and being open to what they have to say, can be the first step in a young person's journey toward self-acceptance and a sense of belonging.*

### **3. A tangible and practical way to speak to the heart - *The Miracle of Hospitality*<sup>4</sup>**

The late Fr. Luigi Giussani, founder of the ecclesial movement *Communion and Liberation*, once reflected on what he called *The Miracle of Hospitality*. He posed a profound question at the heart of human relationships: **What is the origin of hospitality?** Why do we make space for another person in our heart, in our home, in our lives?

Fr. Giussani's answer was both simple and deeply theological: we welcome others because Christ first welcomed us. Even when we do not state it explicitly, our actions express their origins. Genuine hospitality flows from an awareness of having first been loved.

*When we have encountered the gaze of Christ - a gaze that receives us completely, in our brokenness and beauty alike - we are freed to welcome others not as burdens or projects to fix, but as gifts to receive.*

For Giussani, **hospitality is rooted in the awareness of being loved**. It is not grounded in sentimentality, social obligation, or compatibility. It stems from the radical realization that we have been embraced unconditionally by the One who is Love. This awareness becomes the wellspring of our desire to embrace others, not because they are like us or because we stand to gain, but because we have been loved first.

But hospitality is more than just an open door; it is an open heart. **To welcome another person fully means embracing their difference.** In fact, Fr. Giussani would speak of "forgiving the difference." This means releasing the silent expectation that they must be like us to be worthy of love. True hospitality accepts the other as they are, not as we wish they were.

Finally, **hospitality is love in action**, not love as sentiment but love, as St. Thomas Aquinas would say, as willing the good of the other for the other's sake.<sup>5</sup> It means willing their good, not for what they might become or give in return, but for their sake alone.

*The aim of hospitality, then, is not simply to create spaces of belonging - whether physical or emotional, but to love them.*

This example of hospitality came alive in the story of Stacey & Alicia. Stacey, a Christian woman in her mid-30s living in Dallas, opened her home to Alicia, a recent college graduate in her early 20s. Alicia was struggling with uncertainty and pressure from her family. She had no clear direction and

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<sup>4</sup> Luigi Giussani, *The Miracle of Hospitality*, trans. Matthew Henry (Seattle, WA: Slant Books, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas, "ST.I-II.Q26.A4," accessed July 12, 2025, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I-II.Q26.A4.SC>.

was wrestling with questions about her future. The demands to decide and to "figure it out" weighed heavily on her. Stacey, recognizing Alicia's need for a space to breathe and discern, extended an invitation into her home and into her life. She welcomed Alicia with no expectations or agenda. Her hospitality was not conditioned upon Alicia having a plan or presenting herself a certain way. She simply made room for her. In that space of genuine welcome, Alicia was able to rest, think, and pray. Stacey's act of love—rooted in an awareness of having first been loved—created the conditions for Alicia to belong. Within a few weeks, Alicia found clarity. She made decisions about her next steps not out of panic, but from a place of peace. Stacey's gesture embodied the **three foundational principles articulated by Fr. Giussani: an awareness of being loved, the forgiveness of differences, and a selfless love for the person.** Her hospitality was a turning point in Alicia's life—not because it solved all her problems, but because it gave her the space to be received as she was. Stacey spoke to Alicia's heart through hospitality. It wasn't an intellectual answer or a how-to book that helped Alicia make her next decision. Stacey didn't even discuss the decision with her, but she spoke to Alicia's heart through her hospitality. This naturally allowed Alicia to be at peace. Alicia experienced acceptance from Stacey, which in turn enabled her to accept her situation and make a decision.

***Missionary hospitality, in which we actively make space in our lives for young people, can be a practical and tangible way to support their journey of self-acceptance.***

#### **4. The ability to face oneself and overcome shame.**

**"You are not the sum of your weaknesses and failures; you are the sum of the Father's love for you."**  
—St. John Paul II, WYD 2002, Toronto

For many, both young and old, the prospect of facing oneself, acknowledging one's faults and weaknesses, and moving toward self-acceptance can be deeply unsettling. Yet it is often the simple, unassuming actions of others that make this journey possible. In the quiet presence and gestures of people like Miriam and Stacey, those they encountered found a sense of inner peace. It was within these encounters that Alicia and Lina began to recognize something profound: *If those around me are not afraid to see me as I am, without judgment or fear, then why should I be?*

***The journey to being loved is, at its core, a journey of discovering one's inestimable worth in the eyes of God.***

This is not to say that all behavior is accepted, that everything we do is okay – it's not moral relativism. Brene Brown, author of the best-selling book *The Gift of Imperfection*, puts it beautifully.

I believe that there is a profound difference between shame and guilt. I believe that guilt is adaptive and helpful—it's holding something we've done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort. I define shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection. I don't believe shame is helpful or productive. In fact, I think shame is much

more likely to be the source of destructive, hurtful behavior than the solution or cure. I think the fear of disconnection can make us dangerous.<sup>6</sup>

People can confuse guilt with shame. Shame challenges our identity. It is no longer to say what I did was bad or wrong, shame says I am wrong or I am bad. Our very identity is challenged. However, to look at oneself with honesty, with emotional honesty, and say this is how I see myself, is frightening, especially for a young person. In this context, journeying together with another person is always beneficial.

The journey to self-acceptance and beloved sonship is not about ignoring our imperfections, but about looking at them with compassion, seeing them for what they are, being authentic, and embracing them while being vulnerable.<sup>7</sup>

***As Brown points out, “Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change.”<sup>8</sup>***

When we face ourselves with honesty and authenticity, and look at ourselves with compassion rather than shame, we will see that our imperfections are sites of innovation, creativity, and change.

***In our efforts to help young people on a journey of self-acceptance, our focus must be on eliminating shame so that they can see themselves through the eyes of the Risen Christ.***

What enables a young person to rise above shame is the recognition that their imperfections do not define who they are. Instead, their deepest identity is found in being beloved in the eyes of God. Our task, then, is to help young people come to know how profoundly they are loved. This sense of being beloved grounds them in a secure awareness of their inherent dignity, which in turn gives them the courage to face their imperfections without being overwhelmed by shame.

Much more could be said about the journey toward beloved sonship. It is, after all, a journey, one in which we are never static but are always being drawn forward. Along the way, we are invited to confront the reality of our lives. This process often requires healing and restoration to experience true self-acceptance, belonging, and the deep assurance of being loved. We cannot equip young people with every tool they will need for this journey. Ultimately, it is a path they must choose for themselves, one to which they can be invited, encouraged, and accompanied, but which must be freely embraced. What we can do, however, is foster the conditions that enable such a journey. As previously mentioned, offering *missionary hospitality*, or, in the words of Pope Francis, creating a “culture of encounter, can be vital.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Brené Brown, “Shame vs. Guilt,” *Brené Brown* (blog), January 15, 2013, <https://brenebrown.com/articles/2013/01/15/shame-v-guilt/>.

<sup>7</sup> C. Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, Minn: Hazelden, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Brown.

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, “For a Culture of Encounter,” September 13, 2016, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie\\_20160913\\_for-a-culture-of-encounter.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20160913_for-a-culture-of-encounter.html).

*In such spaces, where young people feel seen, heard, and valued, the first steps toward healing and belonging can be taken.*

While we cannot anticipate or solve every challenge they may face, we propose several foundational insights essential to supporting young people in moving toward self-acceptance and a secure sense of identity. These guiding principles, grounded in both faith and human experience, serve as markers on the road toward becoming who they are: beloved sons and daughters of God.

### **Recommended Reading**

1. The Gift of Imperfection by Brené Brown.
2. The Soul of Shame by Curt Thomson, MD
3. Heart speaks to Heart by Fr. John Horn S.J. (A workbook on healing of our memories and history) – Recommend doing the workbook with a mentor or spiritual director.