Chapter 5

Belonging – A Socio-Ecclesial Perspective.

1. The mutuality of the Person, Family, and Community

Building on the spiritual foundations of community and belonging outlined above, let us examine the psychological and social foundations. In this chapter, we explore the relationships between the person, family, and the broader community. A careful balance and intentional focus on these three elements are essential to understanding how belonging works and helping individuals and communities cultivate a deeper sense of belonging. The person, family, and community are closely linked and mutually supportive. Each requires individual attention and specific considerations, given its unique dynamics. It is also essential to consider their interconnectedness and avoid overemphasizing any single aspect. Moreover, applying helpful approaches while keeping this paradigm in mind will promote practical and healthy belonging.

The Person

Just as in the Trinity, the divine persons remain distinct even as they give themselves completely to each other; belonging does not make you lose yourself or your identity but rather fosters it. Therefore, although we place the individual within a group and context, the primary focus remains the person. However, we should remember that this focus on the individual can sometimes have negative overtones. On one hand, there's the risk of excessive self-centeredness, with individuals disconnecting from family and community and choosing solitary paths. Currently, there are concerning signs that such misplaced individuality is on the rise.[1] On the other hand, there's a serious threat of denying individuals their legitimate rights to honor, freedom, and autonomy, reducing them to mere parts of the larger family or societal structure. This autocratic organizational discipline, which can suppress the person, increasingly appears in various forms.[2]

John Paul II places the human person in the proper perspective. He says, "The dignity of the human person is a transcendent value, always recognized as such by those who sincerely search for the truth. Indeed, the whole of human history should be interpreted in the light of this certainty."[3] It is important to remember that the person comes first at every level of the community. A community exists for the benefit of its members. Consequently, if and when a person is harmed or maltreated by a community, there should be an outcry that points out the failure to meet its ultimate goals.

While we emphasize the importance of a person in family and community contexts, it is also crucial to highlight the risks of a self-centered approach. It is well understood that individuals who focus solely on themselves and act against the interests of the community are often met with rejection and ostracism by others. Aware of this, there are ways to help individuals adapt to the customs and expectations of their community in almost every group. Even as children grow up, the community

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[1] Richard Weissbourd and Chris Murphy, "We Have Put Individualism Ahead of the Common Good for Too Long," TIME, April 11, 2023, https://time.com/6269091/individualism-ahead-of-the-common-good-for-too-long/.

[2] Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, "Freedom in the World 2022 -The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule" (Freedom House, 2022), https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule.

[3] John Paul II, "World Day of Peace -1999" (Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Vatican City, January 1999).

carefully teaches specific social skills through 'socialization.' This occurs at home, in neighborhoods, in schools, and elsewhere. It is a process through which a person learns how to live within the family and community and behave in ways that are accepted by others. This learning might include proper greetings, expressions, and other behaviors. We teach children to use appropriate language and good manners. Of course, this guidance isn't limited to raising children. Most organizations provide some form of group orientation when someone joins. All of this aims to help individuals break out of isolation and connect with the community's social fabric and culture.

What is the practical implication of this focus on the individual? Belonging, as we discussed, always centers on the individual. It is the individual within a community context, but the well-being of the community never comes at the expense of the individual's dignity.

> *In our efforts to help young people belong, we should never compromise their dignity or identity. A strong sense of belonging requires recognizing the inherent dignity, worth, and identity of each person within that community.*

Family - The Role of Family in Belonging

Pope John Paul II was renowned for his views on the family as a place where every person's most critical formative steps occur and where the patterns of the broader society also evolve. He famously said, "As the family goes, so goes the nation, and so goes the whole world in which we live."[4]

The descriptive epithet "like a family" is often repeated in discussions of belonging and community relationships. When referring to a well-knit and intimate group, one might say, "They are like a family" or "This group has been a family to me." However, in the real world, many families we know often experience turbulent times and quickly disintegrate. Yet, the family's image remains an ideal that everyone looks up to and aspires to emulate.

Australian philosopher John Finnis explains that the broader unity of community is partly built on the underlying unity of families.

> Part of our unity in the human community, then, is physical and biological. An aspect of the human community is the genetic unity of the race. A family has a special physical unity: close genetic interrelationship, sexual intercourse between parents, the feeding of the unborn infants from their mother's body, a certain degree of compatibility of blood groups and tissues, inherited similarities of physique and perhaps of feeling, temperament, intelligence. . .

Love plays a central role in a sense of belonging within the family. Parents share a unique love for their children, marked by an extraordinary personal investment in their well-being. When a mother gives birth, she instinctively experiences a profound unity with her child, even at a physiological level. Hormonal responses prompt her to remain close, attentive, and protective. As children grow, their mother and father become their first and most formative models of what it means to be human. Within the family, children encounter their earliest experience of community. They learn to relate, communicate, and belong by observing their parents' relationships and participating in family life. Through these daily interactions, children gradually develop an understanding of love, responsibility, and mutual care that shapes their understanding of human relationships beyond the home.

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[4] John Paul II, "Homily - Perth, Australia" (Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Vatican City, November 1986).

Thus, the family serves as the foundational environment to which every member naturally belongs. For young people, this is where their initial sense of belonging is formed. It is from this primary community that they step out into broader social spheres, such as school, work, and other engagements.

As we consider how to create and nurture a sense of belonging for young people, we must recognize that their capacity to experience belonging, whether positively or negatively, is profoundly influenced by early relationships within the family and among close friends.

Their openness to what we offer -whether support, community, or guidance-is often shaped by their upbringing. Not all young people grow up in stable or nurturing households, and these challenges must be taken into consideration when working with them. Psychological and developmental theory – *Attachment theory* is relevant in this regard. Developed by psychologist John Bowlby, Attachment theory examines the human need to seek closeness with others and how we form attachments in childhood, which can affect our future relationships.[5]

Our ability to belong is therefore closely tied to early childhood experiences of relationships and a sense of belonging.

It's not to say we can't break free from these different experiences of attachment and are trapped in our childhood experiences. There are means to break free. However, recognizing that young people's sense of belonging is shaped by their family and upbringing is essential to supporting them. At the same time, those who experience a strong sense of belonging in their families are naturally inclined to seek and foster it in other areas of life.

Above all, we wish to highlight the vital role of the family in cultivating this deep human need for belonging.

Community - Why we need each other!

The final entity we examine closely is the community or society and its relationship to the person. It is within a community that a person experiences a sense of belonging. The Greek philosopher Plato discussed the nature and necessity of public institutions in his famous work, *The Republic*. Written around 375 BC, it centers on Socrates's discussion with others on the dynamics of public life and related institutions. However, in this discussion on belonging, our interest lies in their reflections on the fundamentals of groups and communities. The debate centers on "the city," but we can interpret it in our context as "community."

The first question is: What are a community's origins and fundamental needs? Plato emphasizes the human condition of personal limitation. He notes that a city, or in our discussion, a community, "comes to be because none of us is self-sufficient, but we all need many things." He expands the idea: "And because people need many things, and because one person calls on a second out of one need and on a third out of a different need, many people gather in a single place to live together as partners and helpers." In this way, a community is formed, and reaching out to others to meet one's needs becomes the defining characteristic of any group.

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[5] Pehr Granqvist and Robbie Duschinsky, "Attachment Theory and Research," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.013.51.

This reliance on others is further strengthened through mutual sharing, which encourages a sense of community. Plato also highlights the core belief every person has in the benefits of social interaction and collaboration. He states that people "share things with one another, giving and taking, they do so because each believes that this is better for himself." The discussion below, taken from Plato's The Republic, effectively demonstrates the mutuality, complementarity, and specialized focus that can happen when individuals with different interests and abilities come together and work as a team, whether in a village, city, or small group.

> Come, then, let's create a city in theory from its beginnings. And it's our needs, it seems, that will create it.
>> It is, indeed.
>> Surely our first and greatest need is to provide food to sustain life.
> Certainly.
>> Our second is for shelter, and our third for clothes and such.
>> That's right.
> How, then, will a city be able to provide all this? Won't one person have to be a farmer, another a builder, and another a weaver? And shouldn't we add a cobbler and someone else to provide medical care?
>> All right.
>> So the essential minimum of a city is four or five men?
> And what about this? Must each of them contribute his own work for the common use of all? For example, will a farmer provide food to be shared by them all? Or will he not bother about that, producing one quarter the food in quarter the time, and spending the other three quarters, one in building a house, one in the production of clothes, and one in making shoes, not troubling to associate with the others, but minding his own business on his own?
> Perhaps, Socrates, Adeimantus replied, the way you suggested first would be easier than the other.
>> That certainly wouldn't be surprising, for, even as you were speaking it occurred to me that, in the first place, we aren't all born alike, but each of us differs somewhat in nature from the others, one being suited to one task, another to another. Or don't you think so?
>> I do.
> Second, does one person do a better job if he practices many crafts or—since he's one person himself—if he practices one?
>> If he practices one.
> It's clear, at any rate, I think, that if one misses the right moment in anything, the work is spoiled.
>> It is.
> That's because the thing to be done won't wait on the leisure of the doer, but the doer must of necessity pay close attention to his work rather than be treating it as a secondary occupation.
>> Yes, he must.
> The result, then, is that more plentiful and better-quality goods are more easily produced if each person does one thing for which he is naturally suited, does it at the right time, and is released from having to do any of the others.[6]

There may be cases in which individuals, such as the fictional Robinson Crusoe, were able to survive independently. Still, the fact remains that providing for one's needs and doing so effectively heavily depends on many people working together. Because each person has time to focus on a particular task, they can develop a higher level of skill in that area. Hundreds of years after Plato, philosophers such as David Hume continued to believe that communities are formed for the same reasons.

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[6]These and the preceding quotes are taken from Plato, "Republic", in *The Complete Works of Plato*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. D. S. Hutchinson, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 369b–370c.

> 'Tis by society alone he [the individual] is able to supply his defects, and raise himself up to an equality with his fellow-creatures, and even acquire a superiority above them…By the conjunction of forces, our power is augmented: By the partition of employments, our ability increases: And by mutual succor, we are less exposed to fortune and accidents. 'Tis by this additional force, ability, and security, that society becomes advantageous.[7]

Although two thousand years apart, Plato and Hume generally agree that individuals form societies because dividing labor among many yields has better results than living alone. In fact, with great effort, we might accomplish something small by ourselves, but working as a group gives us a better chance of achieving significant results.

2. Belonging and the mystical body of Christ

Although there is a temptation to view Plato's perspective as utilitarian, in which we see others merely as means to satisfy our own needs, there is an underlying truth that cannot be denied: we are all interdependent. In his encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis emphasizes this reality:

"No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead."

The Holy Father goes on to say:

"How important it is to dream together. By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together."[8]

This mutual dependence is a fundamental truth, as explained in the previous chapter, and it is rooted in the life of the Holy Trinity. We are therefore called to resist the utilitarian temptation to view others merely as instruments for our own goals. Instead, we must come to recognize that it is through relationships with others that we become who we are meant to be. We need one another not only to meet our needs but also to reach the fullness of our own humanity.

As Plato observed, each person brings something unique to the community; it is in the sharing and exchange of these unique gifts and talents that we experience true belonging.

Consider the analogy of a team sport. Not everyone plays the same role, but each player relies on others to fulfill their role. When the team reaches its goal, there is a shared satisfaction and a sense of brotherhood or fraternity.

This participation in a shared purpose manifests as a sense of belonging.

This is the same phenomenon that occurs in a community where each person shares their gifts and participates in a shared purpose.

St. Paul uses a similar analogy in **1 Corinthians 12:12 -27**:

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."

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[7]David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton, Reprint with corrections, Oxford Philosophical Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 312.

[8] Pope Francis, "Fratelli Tutti: Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship" (Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Vatican City, 2020), para. 8.

He continues:

"If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."

What a beautiful image for us to reflect on. It is not about comparing worth or measuring what each person can offer. Instead, each member is unique, offering something irreplaceable. And together, in sharing our gifts, we become the one Body of Christ. When a player scores a goal in soccer, the entire team rejoices, not just the scorer. Likewise, the writing of this book is possible not only because of the contribution of the team involved but also because it builds on years of research and insights from various disciplines.

> *In our efforts to help young people find a sense of belonging, we must help them recognize that each person carries something unique and invaluable.*

For St. Paul, this diversity of gifts did not divide the community; instead, it strengthened it. Our task is to help bring out this uniqueness while channeling it toward something greater than the individual shared purpose in communion with others. It is in this mutual participation, where each person offers their distinct contribution toward a common goal, that the experience of true belonging is born.

We will explore this theme of shared purpose and its relationship to belonging in greater depth in the chapters to come.

3. Human Needs and Belonging

We have explored belonging in relation to the human person, family, and community from sociological, theological, and ecclesiological perspectives. Yet belonging cannot be understood fully without attending to a more basic question: human need. Plato's insight that human beings are fundamentally needy invites us to ask how these needs shape social life and the experience of belonging. Because the human person is created for relationship, belonging is not merely a preference or social accessory but a genuine human necessity. To speak of belonging as a need is to recognize that it emerges from the very conditions of human life.

Behavioral science and philosophy converge on this point. Human beings form communities not only because they desire connection but because they must rely on others to survive and flourish. When belonging is framed as a response to everyday human needs, it becomes more concrete and relatable. Communities are not abstract ideals but lived spaces where people seek protection, sustenance, meaning, and recognition.

Human Needs in Focus

Needs, desires, and aspirations drive human behavior and shape the formation of communities. People join groups, remain in relationships, or disengage from communities largely based on whether their core needs are being met. St. Thomas Aquinas offers a helpful framework by identifying three fundamental human inclinations.[9] First is the inclination toward self-preservation and safety. Human beings are physically vulnerable and depend on others for protection. This security is experienced through family, shelter, social order, and systems of justice. A stable

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[9] Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologiae, I-II.Q94," accessed July 3, 2025, https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I-II.Q94.

environment allows individuals to live without constant fear and creates the foundation for trust and belonging.

Second, Aquinas points to natural and physical needs shared with the animal world, such as hunger, thirst, sexuality, and the nurturing of children. These needs cannot be met in isolation. While history records rare examples of individuals surviving alone, such cases are exceptions that highlight the rule. Human beings naturally seek cooperation and interdependence. Even basic activities like eating, working, and raising children are embedded in social networks. When these needs are met within a community, people experience not only survival but dignity.

The third category encompasses higher sociocultural inclinations, including the pursuit of knowledge, friendship, meaning, and spiritual life. These are often the needs that receive the most attention when communities attempt renewal or reform. Yet they presuppose the fulfillment of more basic needs. When people feel unsafe or lack basic necessities, participation in cultural, intellectual, or spiritual life becomes difficult. Sustainable belonging requires attention to all three levels of human need.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs -Climbing the Ladder of Aspirations

A useful comparison can be drawn between Aquinas's framework and Psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow presents human motivation as a progression from basic physical needs to safety, belonging, esteem, and ultimately self-actualization. While his model differs in emphasis, it offers a vivid way to understand how people move from survival to growth. When food, shelter, and safety are threatened, these concerns dominate attention.

Only when stability is restored do people begin to seek connection, recognition, and personal fulfillment.
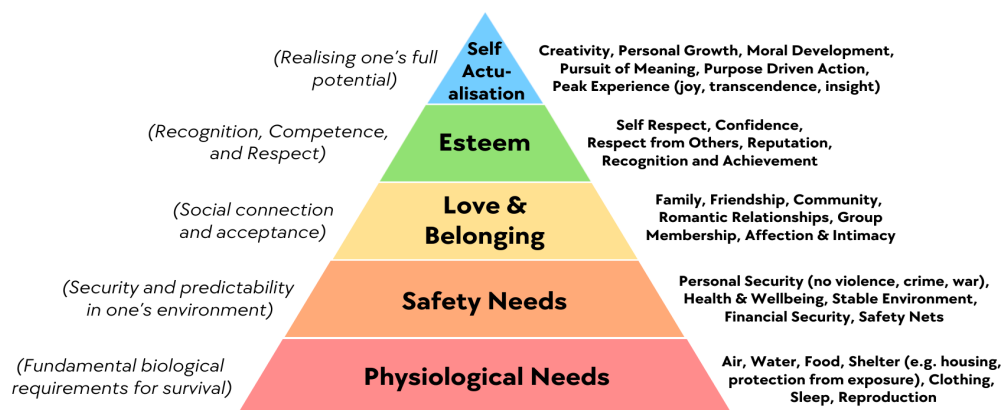

*Diagram of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (five-level model). Based on his original 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation" and later clarifications.*Wikimedia Commons.

This pattern is visible in everyday life. Families struggling to meet basic needs often focus all their energy on survival. When a stable income or secure housing is achieved, space opens for relationships, community involvement, and future aspirations. Belonging, in this sense, is both a need in itself and a be met not through programs alone but through consistent presence, recognition, and meaningful participation. When young people feel unseen or excluded, their distress is not superficial but rooted in unmet human needs. Conversely, when young people are welcomed, valued, and given responsibility, they are more likely to grow in confidence, moving from bare survival to higher human flourishing.

Maslow's distinction between deficiency needs and growth needs offers an important insight, especially when working with young people.

Belonging and esteem are deeply relational needs. They are met not through programs alone but through consistent presence, recognition, and meaningful participation.

When young people feel unseen or excluded, their distress is not superficial but rooted in unmet human needs. Conversely, when they are welcomed, valued, and given responsibility, they are more likely to grow in confidence, purpose, and creativity.

Understanding belonging through the lens of human need allows communities to move beyond abstract ideals toward concrete practices. It invites leaders, families, and institutions to ask not only what they believe but how they support the full range of human needs. In doing so, belonging becomes not a vague sentiment but a lived experience grounded in the realities of human life.

A key question is: What are our main takeaways from Maslow's hierarchy of needs when discussing young people and their sense of belonging?

When we support someone, we need to be mindful of their inner aspirations, for which Maslow provides a clear framework for understanding a young person's developmental trajectory.

As mentioned earlier, to borrow Aristotle's often-quoted phrase, Man is a 'social animal' deeply embedded in a web of social connections and highly dependent on the civic and cultural amenities that society offers. Although we rely heavily on society even for basic physical and security needs, the higher needs of belonging and esteem become especially important, as social connections are essential in fulfilling these needs.

Anna's journey exemplifies this. Her parents struggled to make ends meet, coming from a relatively deprived background as new migrants to a new country. In a few years, they overcame their major struggles and built some financial security. When Anna grew up, she found a well-managed home with moderate yet sufficient means to support her living. Her parents were eager to provide for Anna and her two younger brothers' needs. However, a new set of challenges emerged as Anna entered her adolescence. Deteriorating relationships and heated exchanges had soured her home

environment. The reason? Her eagerness to spend time with her friends initially upset everyone at home. By the time she was in high school, Anna's appearance, language, and overall demeanor had undergone noticeable changes. Her parents found it hard to understand why the young girl failed to recognize the effort they put into meeting all her needs and their dedication to her and her brothers, while she was absorbed in the world of her "wayward lot of new friends" and their spoiled ways. Faced with constant accusations and heated arguments, the teenager believed that the older generation would never understand her. This, in turn, led her to rely more on her friends for comfort and to seek their company and culture even more.

In Anna's chaotic conflict with her parents, her trusted cousin Max intervened. Through his astute analysis, he understood the rigid stances of Anna and her parents and how these fueled the growing conflict. In her parents' view, they lovingly provided all the essential elements of life, such as financial security and daily necessities, which, as they complained, the young girl did not appreciate. In other words, their focus was mainly on her basic needs for survival and safety. However, the young girl had moved beyond these needs. Her primary concern and struggle were finding a place within her friends' circles, driven by her need for belonging and self-esteem.

Her cousin Max, for his part, could recognize the similarities in the paths taken by Anna and her parents. Both were striving for acceptance and belonging, but at different levels. Max's clear understanding led to initial self-discovery and acceptance, which, in turn, fostered mutual understanding and dialogue between Anna and her parents. The happy ending was that the girl's family started connecting with her friends, and as a next step, they had opportunities to communicate with their own families. Our analysis indicates that these developments helped Anna's parents cultivate a sense of belonging and meet their own self-esteem needs.

Having examined belonging through the lenses of the human person, family, and community, and from a socio-psychological perspective that understands belonging as a fundamental human need, we now turn toward the practical task of helping a young person belong. Up to this point, we have explored why belonging is essential, how the human person is inherently oriented toward belonging, and how different disciplines help us understand what belonging truly entails.

With these perspectives in mind, the next chapter delineates a concrete path for accompaniment, one that seeks to move beyond theory and toward practice, helping young people not only to be included but to experience genuine belonging.