Article

Community, Immunity, and Vulnerability: Paradoxes and Possibilities in Postpandemic Diaconal Practice

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Abstract: This article discusses an inherent paradox in contemporary conceptualisations of community as a challenge to diaconia. Logics of protection separate insiders from outsiders, producing a fundamental antagonism between those who belong to the community and those who threaten it. During pandemics, this logic is exacerbated. When contagion threatens all, even the community needs to be protected from itself. Immunitarian defences are required for the safety of all community members. However, measures implemented to ensure immunity can also harm people's mental and somatic health. This paradox presents ethical and practical challenges for inclusive justice, including diaconia. Concerning this dilemma, the article draws on Roberto Esposito's reframing of community and immunitarian defence. Esposito argues that immunitarian mechanisms must promote tolerance of otherness through openness to its presence within. I suggest that this openness can be seen as a fundamental ontological vulnerability shared by all living creatures. Learning from recent contributions within vulnerability studies and feminist and trauma theologies, I employ Tony Addy's concept of conviviality as a model for diaconal community building, seeking to elucidate the relevance of Esposito's thinking to postpandemic diaconal practice.

Keywords: community; immunity; vulnerability; COVID-19; diaconal practice; Roberto Esposito

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic presented complex challenges for diaconal practice and the theories that inform such practice (Hellöre 2021; de Oliveira and da Paixão 2021). Under the sudden isolating global conditions caused by social distancing and movement restrictions, a destructive but apparently unavoidable contradiction between community and immunity became visible. Faced with the virus, community needed to protect itself from itself.

Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito has for several decades grappled with this paradoxical interrelation of community and immunity (Esposito 2002, 2004, 2006). Drawing on Esposito's original thinking on the tension and interconnection between these two concepts, I ask in this article how the paradoxical contradiction between exclusion and inclusion in the foundations of community may be reconciled in a diaconal practice that seeks just inclusion. In dialogue with Esposito's interpretation of the *munus* that interconnects and separates community and immunity, I suggest that the post-COVID-19 exclusion/inclusion impasse in community might be confronted and overcome by framing vulnerability as a key component of community building rather than a limitation. For this purpose, I shall draw on recent contributions from vulnerability studies and feminist theology, as well as highlight central Christian narratives that offer interpretations of vulnerability as a vital force for supporting inclusion and human flourishing. This discussion may help to elucidate the concept of community in postpandemic diaconal practice.

2. Community and Exclusion

To what degree does community building depend on exclusion mechanisms? Diaconia, as Christian social practice in various institutional, cultural, and political contexts, has as one of its main goals the formation of just and inclusive communities. According to the

diaconal reflection on 'conviviality' developed by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), forming an inclusive community is the 'core meaning of diakonia in relation to increasing diversity and growing inequality in society', and 'the key task for diakonia and the identity of a diaconal church'.[1]

This is not a straightforward task. The LWF report *Seeking Conviviality* points to the fact that 'communities can be exclusive and can build up walls which prevent them from relating to people from "other" communities', (Addy 2013, p. 18). Complicating the issue even further, there seems to be an intrinsic contradiction in any endeavour to form an inclusive community. Communitarian approaches seem to need or even produce an 'outside'. Community is constituted by what is not included. There is a demarcation between inside and outside in the fundamental conceptualisation of community and, more importantly, in the political and practical efforts that strengthen particular groups or fellowships. People tend to unify more easily under polarisation conditions. The binary 'us versus them' is at the core of these dynamics. Identity politics emerge from and feed on such polarisation—as reflected politically in the spread of authoritarian populisms around the globe (Schmiedel and Ralston 2022; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Graff-Kallevåg et al. 2021).

This paradox—that community is founded on and fosters exclusion—is a particular challenge for diaconal practice. If a community is exclusive by definition, how can one live up to the ambition of creating an inclusive community?

The pandemic intensified this paradoxical impasse. The COVID-19 pandemic was not, as was often alleged, 'unprecedented'. On the contrary, it should have been seen as something normal and expected, and it *was* expected by experts. In *Epidemics and Society* (Snowden 2019), published at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, Frank M. Snowden sees epidemics as a key factor driving historical change and development. He sees infectious diseases as important for understanding societal developments, such as economic crises, wars, and revolutions. Pandemics function as looking glasses, showing how our society is constructed. They reveal the general standards of living and levels of trust between community members. So, what do we see through the lens of COVID-19 in terms of its effect on our ability to construct an inclusive community?

First, the world that seemed to abruptly become united by the virus was nonetheless revealed as fragmented and polarised by efforts to combat the disease. Despite rhetoric and efforts to the contrary, power and privilege prevailed in the distribution of vaccines. The slogan that 'no-one is safe until everyone is safe' did not translate into priorities and practices.[2]

Second, harsh isolation, separation, 'social' distancing, and restricted-gathering policies, enforced globally in all areas of the public sphere, shaped the contours of a totally (human) 'contactless society'.[3] The cure for the threat against human lives was to restrict human interaction and minimise community. I do not intend, herein, to discuss the medical rationales for these policies. They varied across countries, and the jury is still out on their respective efficacies. However, in the aftermath of the pandemic, there is evidence that these protective measures came at a high cost, particularly in terms of loneliness. Loneliness can have severe health consequences, increasing the risks of depression, anxiety, and various forms of functional decline. It affects behaviours related to preventive health, exercise, eating habits, and/or substance use and leads to premature death. According to Noreena Hertz in *The Lonely Century* (Hertz 2021), a pandemic of loneliness was already developing before COVID-19 struck. Research suggests that COVID-19 lockdowns widened the 'loneliness gap' between the most and least lonely people and increased potential long-term inequalities in loneliness (Patulny and Bower 2022). The pandemic has also exacerbated existing inequalities in loneliness related to race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Kotwal et al. 2022). Marginalised groups, such as homeless people, have been disproportionally negatively affected by physical distancing regulations (Skolnik 2020).

These experiences call for a more profound reflection on our understanding of community, not least in the context of diaconal practice. Does community require not only the construction of an imagined or real outside but also a certain distancing from or protection

against itself? In *Community. Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, the late Polish–British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman sees community as a bargain between freedom and safety: 'We cannot be human without both security and freedom; but we cannot have both at the same time and both in quantities which we find fully satisfactory' (Bauman 2001, p. 5). Addressing some of the same dilemmas as Bauman, but from the perspective of critical political theory, Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito examines the tension between community and immunity. Esposito's innovative thinking can illuminate the diaconal challenge of promoting an inclusive community in postpandemic times.

3. Esposito on Community and Immunity

The recent contributions of Italian philosophers have become central to rethinking European and global politics (Hardt and Negri 2004, 2000; Agamben 1998, 2000, 2005). Roberto Esposito's thinking follows this trend. Particularly relevant for my purpose here are his contributions to the conceptualisation of political community, presented in his trilogy comprising *Communitas* (Esposito 2010), *Immunitas* (Esposito 2011), and *Bios* (Esposito 2008). Influenced by Foucault's genealogical approach and deeply engaged in the discussion on the French intellectual's turn to biopolitics in *Society Must Be Defended* (Foucault et al. 2003), Esposito engages in the fundamental philosophical debate about what constitutes a community. *Communitas* is conventionally understood as something that people have in common. It is seen as a property shared by people who, in coming together, form a group of imagined likenesses. This can be seen in identity politics and communitarian ideologies, which tend to drive forces of exclusion; there is an 'inside' enclosing and protecting itself against the 'outside'.

However, by exploring the etymological origins of the word *communitas*, Esposito uncovers a different meaning. What people share and have in common in a com-*munity* is not property, but *munus*. The 'complex, but pregnant meaning of munus', says Esposito, 'is the sharing of a burden, a responsibility, or a debt' (Esposito 2009, p. 26). Community is the togetherness of people, not around their property but their obligations or debts. In this sense, community means a subtraction rather than an addition, a minus rather than a plus: 'Non da un "piu", ma da un "meno", da una macanza' (Esposito 2006, p. xiii). Community creates not a surplus but a deficit of subjectivity (Esposito 2009, p. 26). Thus, communitas takes on a meaning that is totally opposed to what is 'proper'; instead, community 'begins where property ends': 'è ciò che non è proprio; che comincia là dove il proprio finisce' (Esposito 2006, p. x).

In Esposito's rendering, these origins reveal the 'community's categorical distance from any idea of property collectively owned by a group of individuals—or even from their belonging to a common identity' (Esposito 2010, p. 26). What is common to the origins of community is not possession, property, and appropriation, but a fundamental lack. The term *munus* was initially understood as a gift *given*, not a gift received. It is thus 'a principle that lacks "remuneration"' (Esposito 2010, p. 27).

For Esposito, this point is not merely political but ontological. In this sense, community members are 'no longer identical to themselves, but structurally exposed to a tendency that leads them to break their individual limits and face up to their "outside"'. Thus, we could say that 'the other' is no longer constituted as an opponent or enemy outside a community. The other—the stranger—is given the primary place in a community in which the subject is no longer the 'same'. In a certain way, this turns the community into a 'community of others', leaving in its midst an absence of subjectivity and identity (Esposito 2009, p. 26).

In other words, following Esposito's interpretation, it is possible to identify a reversal of the conceptual meaning of community throughout history. What 'started' as an inclusive openness towards difference and the outside has resulted in identitarian communitarianism that favours protection, property, and defence of likeness against otherness. How is this defence typically mobilised? What are the mechanisms of protection?

The defence mechanism is designated as the opposite term of communitas—*immunitas*. *Immunitas* means being 'freed from' the obligation of *munus*. *Immunitas* describes key

concerns in present-day politics, medicine, law, and technology. Diverse events call for a 'protective response in the face of a risk' (Esposito 2011, p. 1) that shows signs of 'trespassing or violating borders' (Esposito 2011, p. 2). Key concepts here are contagion and contamination—realities that the COVID-19 pandemic brought sharply to global attention. *Immunitas* acquires its meaning from what it lacks—the 'task, obligation, duty' that Esposito considers to be the core meaning of *munus* (Esposito 2011, p. 5).

Thus, *immunitas* can be seen as both an exemption and a privilege (Esposito 2011, p. 6). It is generally conceptualised and communicated as a good thing, a necessity, and an obligation. We find it everywhere: diplomatic immunity, protection against data viruses, and political mechanisms to counter the possibly contagious influence of foreign cultures or religions in a multicultural world. However, immunity not only protects a community but also undermines it. This is because, according to Esposito, immunity 'interrupts the social circuit of reciprocal gift-giving, which is what the earliest and most binding meaning of the term communitas referred to' (Esposito 2011, p. 6). Protection is necessary but it can become autodestructive by turning its protective force against life itself. The requirement for exemption and protection from 'munus' becomes an 'immunity device' (*dispositivo immunitario*) that undermines what it aims to protect.

In Foucauldian biopolitics, immune responses are a critical ingredient of the exercise of power. Esposito claims that exaggerated antiterror mechanisms and policies that protect nations, religions, or cultures develop into something resembling an autoimmune disease, which ultimately becomes more contagious and toxic than any (real or imagined) external threats. The harmful effects of COVID-19 protective measures, as evidenced by statistics on loneliness, depression, and related ills, exemplify this. Beyond a certain point, the cure may become more damaging to life than the disease. *Immunitas* may end up destroying *communitas*; what is supposed to safeguard life in common negates it in the very act of protection.

If, as the pandemic also showed, immunisation mechanisms and strategies, from vaccination to social restriction, are necessary to reduce suffering and prevent mass death, how can their possible negative impacts on community be checked? This is the relevant question for post-COVID-19 diaconal practice.

Despite the preceding analysis, Esposito acknowledges that *immunitas* is a force for life. It can also protect community. This happens when immunitary measures allow community—or life in community, conviviality—to remain *open* to difference and externality. As Esposito reminds us, this is how vaccination traditionally works. A small dose of the disease (or its active 'ingredient') is injected to activate the body's defence mechanism and create the necessary antibodies. These antibodies protect the body and the self without totally excluding what is 'other'.

Esposito also presents pregnancy as an extraordinary example of a natural immunity mechanism that simultaneously accepts and protects both oneself and another. Even though the mother's immune system is different from that of her foetus, it does not reject the child's potentially threatening otherness but acts in a way that preserves the lives of both bodies—that of the mother and that of the child. Pregnancy thus becomes, for Esposito, a paradigmatic case of the immunitary dialectic. The mother's immune mechanism not only protects the child but also 'immunizes itself from an excess of immunization' (Esposito 2011, pp. 169–71).

Similarly, *immunitas* can protect *communitas*, Esposito claims, through paradoxical and measured strategies of inclusion (not exclusion) of otherness. An immunisation that does not undermine life in common must preserve *munus*—the obligation, debt, and openness to the other. Thus, Esposito develops a sort of 'affirmative biopolitics' (Campbell 2008, p. ix), which is realised when community affirms life through a shared debt and common obligation to the other (*munus*).

According to Esposito, living together will always entail risk:

> Community is never a place of arrival, but one of departure. It is even the very departure towards what does not and will never belong to us. Therefore, commu-

nitas is far from producing the effects of commonness [*comunanza*], association [*accomunamento*], or communion. It does not warm us up or protect us. On the contrary, it exposes the subject to the most radical risk: the risk of losing, together with his individuality and the boundaries that guarantee the fact that he is intangible for the other. The risk of suddenly slipping into the nothing of the thing. (Esposito 2009, p. 28)

However, it is precisely through this risk—this exposure—that the immunitary mechanism necessary to protect against real threats to a community is simultaneously held in check. Community is thus protected while remaining open to otherness. Protection is a protection of openness to the other, not an enclosure of the self.

Esposito characterises this openness, which entails a risk (the *munus* that combines and separates community and immunity), as a 'wound that cannot heal' because it is created by life itself for the protection of life. It is a condition for the preservation and flourishing of all life. In Esposito's words, this wound is salvific:

If life—which in all its forms is the object of immunization—cannot be preserved except by placing something inside that subtly contradicts it, we must infer that the preservation of life corresponds with a form of restriction that somehow separates it from itself. Its salvation thus depends on a wound that cannot heal because the wound is created by life itself. (Esposito 2011, p. 8)

4. Immunity and Vulnerability

Esposito understands *munus* as openness to the other and a life-preserving obligation or salvific 'wound' that could also be described, in my view, as a fundamental vulnerability (Stålsett 2023, pp. 49–54). Interdisciplinary vulnerability studies challenge standard definitions of vulnerability as a weakness that should be overcome. Vulnerability is openness to the other that involves an offer, an obligation, and a risk. It is not only an unavoidable feature of the human individual and social life but an active and inalienable ingredient in practices of shared resistance to precariousness and exclusion. In fact, 'without being able to think about vulnerability', Judith Butler argues, 'we cannot think about resistance, and . . . by thinking about resistance, we are already under way, dismantling the resistance to vulnerability in order precisely to resist' (Butler 2016, p. 27). Similarly, Ewa Ziarek points out that the 'political and ethical vulnerability of action enables rather than impairs its transformative possibilities'. For her, the contingency and unpredictability of vulnerability make it 'a paradoxical condition of political transformation' (Ziarek 2013, p. 81).

However, the experience of vulnerability is ambivalent. Butler points out that it is necessary to distinguish between affirming vulnerability 'as an existential condition, since we are all subject to accidents, illness, and attacks that can expunge our lives quite quickly', and seeing it as 'a socially induced condition, which accounts for the disproportionate exposure to suffering, especially among those broadly called the precariat for whom access to shelter, food, and medical care is often quite drastically limited' (Butler 2016, p. 25). Butler expresses this distinction as the *precariousness* that characterises all living beings, as opposed to *precarity*, which is the disproportionate exposure to suffering.

Vulnerability can never be eliminated from life. When striving for invulnerability becomes the critical driving force in politics, violently repressive dynamics are often unleashed. United States political psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton described such dynamics as the 'superpower syndrome' (Lifton 2003), at the heart of which he sees a powerful fear prompting a struggle to fight a vulnerability that can never be eliminated, either by a nation or an individual. Caught in the squeeze between vulnerability as both intolerable and irrefutable, powerful nations develop an illusion of invulnerability. To sustain the illusion, a superpower takes increasingly draconian actions that dangerously destabilise life in the spheres of its influence.

In other words, in an attempt to eliminate vulnerability, a community may lose itself, turn against itself, and become autodestructive. At the same time, acknowledging that the openness of vulnerability is a risk, involving what Butler and the Greek feminist

philosopher Athena Athanasiou termed 'dispossession' (Butler and Athanasiou 2013) calls for a dual conceptualisation of vulnerability. The situational suffering and loss resulting from the vulnerability of life in common can only be resisted in and through resources equally embedded in the ontological and societal vulnerability of a community centred on a shared *munus*. Hence, it is necessary to oppose a conventional conceptualisation of vulnerability as a problem that should be solved or a risk that should be reduced or even eliminated to develop the kind of inclusive community that Esposito's analysis facilitates.[4]

5. Christian Resources for Revalorising Vulnerability

Ideally, diaconal practice involves plural actions for creating just and inclusive communities. What characterises diaconia as a social practice is that it is inspired by, interpreted through, and interrupted by resources drawn from the Christian faith (Stålsett 2021). These resources may be theologies, scriptural readings, liturgies, prayers, symbols, or ethical norms and values. Central to these resources are personal and communitarian narratives of embodied vulnerability. How can these resources inform a different diaconal conceptualisation of the community for which shared vulnerability is fundamental?

Human life is constantly exposed to diverse risks and calamities. However, a basic theme in the Christian narrative is that God takes on the inescapable vulnerability of human life in and through God's salvific manifestation in Christ. Vulnerability is thus given divine recognition and presented as life saving for faith. This view of vulnerability as life-affirming rather than a threat is deeply embedded in the Christian tradition. It is, however, also contested within that same tradition (Stålsett 2015; Pool 2009, 2010). Recent contributions, not least within differing strands of feminist theology, discuss the implications of contestations regarding the vicissitudes or value of vulnerability.

In 1990, Dorothee Sölle wrote poetically–theologically of *Das Fenster der Verwundbarkeit*—the window of vulnerability—contrasting the military's justification of the arms race ('the window of vulnerability must be closed') with that of her skin: 'My skin/is a window of vulnerability/without moisture, without touching/I must die'. This window, Sölle claims, is 'open toward heaven' (Sölle 1990, p. vii).[5] Thus, vulnerability is openness to transcendence but transcendence also creates vulnerability. Although she asserts that this point holds true for all religions, Sölle claims that it is stretched to its utmost limit in the Christian faith. She contends that when God makes Godself vulnerable in Christ, the 'manly ideal' of invulnerability is resisted and even caricatured. Community with Christ, who is God's wound in the world, can only be achieved through an open window of vulnerability (Sölle 1990, p. XI).

Writing from within the reformed tradition, Kristine A. Culp sees human vulnerability as a site for harm and tragedy but also for the flourishing of life and the appearance of God's glory (Culp 2010). Stretching the conventional understanding of the concept, she sees humans as 'vulnerable not only to being harmed, but also to the love and care of others' (Culp 2010, p. 2). Capacities for healing and harm are linked (Culp 2010, p. 16). Vulnerability is, she claims, the 'susceptibility to being changed for good and for ill' (Culp 2010, p. 2). Despite theological traditions that amount to various forms of 'strategies of invulnerability', Culp stresses that the purpose of life before God, according to Christianity, is not to overcome vulnerability. In the interdependent vulnerable sharing of life, a different community emerges in which life can be received as a vulnerable but glorious gift of God (Culp 2010, p. 181).

Similarly, but from the committed standpoint of 'doubly subjugated knowledge' of maternal suffering (Gandolfo 2015, p. 21) and rooted in the Catholic tradition, Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo explores ways in which the 'human experience of redemption takes place within the vulnerability of the human condition' (Gandolfo 2015, p. 5). She argues that, beyond what feminist and liberationist theologians recognise, the root causes of suffering are found *within* this embodied condition (Gandolfo 2015, p. 36). Hence, Gandolfo sees vulnerability as a continuing problem in human life because the vulnerable condition makes humans capable of inflicting harm on others (Gandolfo 2015, p. 10). This may be one

of the reasons why she characterises God (i.e., God's love) as *invulnerable*: 'Invulnerability is that dimension of divinity that offers vulnerable human beings stability of identity as *imago dei* and an unchanging love on which to draw for courage, resilience, and resistance, even in the face of horrors' (Gandolfo 2015, p. 189).

This part of Gandolfo's reasoning, moving from vulnerability as a cause of harm for others to understanding God as invulnerable love, is not quite convincing. It is not clear why the violation of vulnerability should be seen as an intrinsic part of the vulnerable condition itself. Moreover, love, it seems, cannot avoid being vulnerable if it is to be understood as love, at least in human terms. Still, Gandolfo's approach helpfully addresses the problem of 'systems of privilege' that she sees as exercising violent 'mismanagement of vulnerability' (Gandolfo 2015, p. 137). This mismanagement harms marginalised and privileged groups alike, since it infers suffering for the first group and 'witting or unwitting participation in the perpetration of further harm' for the other. Still, it is worth asking whether it really is the vulnerability of the privileged that leads to their (complicity with) violent mismanagement. Is the cause not in their neglect of, or attempt to escape, the vulnerable condition?

The Swiss feminist theologian Heike Springhart, since 2021 Bishop of the Evangelische Landeskirche in Baden, prefers to address vulnerability as the foundation for a more *realistic* anthropology (Springhart 2017, p. 14). In line with Judith Butler and others in recently turning to an affirmative recognition of vulnerability, she distinguishes between an ontological or fundamental vulnerability shared between all human beings and a situated or contextual vulnerability, which is variable and often unequally and unjustly distributed (Springhart 2017, p. 17).

This distinction helps uphold the value of vulnerability while avoiding any idealisation of everything involved in experiences of being vulnerable. It also addresses the paradox of privilege that Gandolfo is concerned about without necessarily making one's own vulnerability the cause of the violation of others.

However, although the distinction is adequate, I disagree with Springhart's claim that *the complementarity* of ontological and situated vulnerability makes vulnerability a valuable component of human life (Springhart 2017, p. 24). Instead, I argue that it is the ontological dimension of vulnerability that gives rise to its situational aspects and it is on the situational level that violations occur. Like Butler, I find it more adequate to see these dimensions—ontological and situational, precariousness and precarity—as existing in a state of *tension*.

How could theological contributions concerning vulnerability, in and through their differences and mutual contestations, support diaconal attempts to overcome critical impasses in postpandemic community building (Stålsett 2021)?

6. Relevance to Postpandemic Diaconal Community Building

The richness and complexity of Esposito's reconceptualisation of community, as well as interdisciplinary discussions on vulnerability, are underexplored in diaconal studies. Diaconia aims for 'open, just, hospitable and inclusive communities', states Cuban theologian Carlos E. Ham on behalf of a working group within the context of the World Council of Churches.[6] He continues: 'Churches must strive to become discrimination-free zones and sanctuaries of safety and hope' (Ham 2012, pp. 390–91). However, Christian community building is evidently not free of identitarian logics of sameness, protectionism, and polarisation, either in the seemingly benevolent form of 'benefactor as distinct from 'beneficiary' or the more confrontational form of 'us' versus 'them'. The global COVID-19 pandemic has not made the task easier. How could Esposito's portrayal of community, related to immunity through an original retrieval of the meaning of *munus* as a burden or debt (or, in my rendering, as vulnerability), be helpful in a postpandemic diaconal practice that seeks to envision and achieve a truly inclusive community? I tentatively suggest three characteristics that follow from the preceding theoretical reflection, which I will relate to

the diaconal adoption of 'conviviality' as a core concept and to the recent development of a 'theology of trauma'.

6.1. Conviviality as Exposure and Dispossession

One of the main proponents of 'conviviality' as a model for diaconal community building is Tony Addy.[7] Drawing on the Austrian Roman Catholic priest, theologian, philosopher, and social critic Ivan Illich's use of conviviality, Addy defines it as 'the art and practice of living together' in 'creative relationships between people, and between people and their environment' (Addy 2019, p. 196). He suggests practical steps for forming such a community, one of which is a moment of 'exposure' (Addy 2019, pp. 200–3). According to Addy, exposure as a step towards an inclusive community involves spending time with others without having a 'task or role to perform', simply observing, receiving, and learning from the experience. Central to this practice is the idea of 'empty space, not filling up the gap between "self" and what is experienced with readymade concepts and interpretations' (Addy 2019, p. 202). Combining this methodological proposal with the insights gained from Esposito's concept of *munus* and Butler and Athanasiou's reflections on dispossession, I suggest seeing this kind of exposure as a form of 'acting vulnerably' (Stålsett 2023, pp. 63–106). Esposito shows that immunitarian impulses become (auto-)destructive to a community when they attempt to completely fence off the presence of the other. By contrast, he holds that a certain openness to and inclusion of exactly that which identitarian approaches conceive as a threat in fact preserves life and, thus, sustains community.

This resembles Athanasiou and Butler's conceptualisation of dispossession—the act of losing oneself in the other—as constituting an individual's agency. Being dispossessed means being exposed to risk and danger but it is also a 'heteronomic condition of autonomy', according to these two feminist critical theorists (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, p. 2).

Diaconal configurations of communities should encourage this kind of dispossessive exposure, thus placing vulnerability at the centre of community building. In my view, the empty space between self and 'readymade concepts and interpretations', based on Addy's conviviality approach, could be seen as a way of practically respecting *munus* as a 'void' that paradoxically unites community and immunity.

6.2. Solidarity of the Shaken

Another way of viewing this vulnerable exposure at the core of diaconal conviviality is through what Addy called 'shakenness'. The inspiration for this term is a heretical essay written by Czech philosopher Jan Patočka. Reflecting on what he calls the 'frontline experience' (*Fronterlebnis*), Patočka, according to Michaela Belejkaničová's recent interpretation of his writings, sees the potential for the emergence of a 'salvific community', which he calls 'the solidarity of the shaken'. This is 'the solidarity of those who are capable of embracing history—the conflict between the everyday secure life (the life that is limited by fear) and the life at the peak (the life of the realm of constant shaking, the life in danger, without security that there will be another day)' (Belejkaničová 2021, p. 305). Addy suggests that such solidarity of the shaken can configure a truly convivial diaconal community today (Addy 2019, pp. 199–200).

This experience of being shaken as forming a different kind of solidarity again mirrors the practice of exposure and dispossession.[8] Conviviality, as an expression of the solidarity of the shaken, can be theoretically enriched, I suggest, by linking it to Esposito's concept of community, informed by vulnerability theory. The potential of being shaken and entering an empathic relationship with others who are equally affected depends on a reframing of the significance of vulnerability in diaconal community building. Seeing this shakenness not as a threat but as a cornerstone of community has practical and political consequences.

6.3. Engaging Wounds That Do Not Heal

Finally, as we have seen, Esposito speaks of a 'wound that cannot heal' but, in its openness, 'saves' community from its external threats as well as from its immunitarian

defences. The preservation of life depends on inserting 'something inside that subtly contradicts it' (Esposito 2011, p. 8). At the core of the Christian story, we find narratives of a birth under precarious conditions and of a violent, premature death on a cross. What is most remarkable and unique in this religious view of life is that the saving presence of God is held to be most densely communicated and received through historic events involving bodily risk and exposure. Together, they tell the story of a vulnerable God (Placher 1994). Faith in God's saving presence in the pregnancy of Mary and the birth of her child, and in the violent persecution, public torture, and crucifixion of Jesus makes it impossible to untangle Christianity from vulnerability. Hence, to borrow Sölle's phrase, Christ is 'God's wound in the world'.

However, as Sölle herself underscored (Sölle 1973, 1978), a simplistic and idealising spiritualisation of woundedness must be avoided at all costs. In more recent suggestive reflections about a possible 'trauma theology' developed by feminist theologians Serene Jones (Jones 2009) and Shelly Rambo (Rambo 2010, 2017), the premise is that not all wounds will be healed. Jones points out that the ancient Greek word for a wound is *trauma*, meaning 'an injury inflicted upon the body by an act of violence'. 'To be traumatized is to be slashed or struck down by a hostile external force that threatens to destroy you . . . it involves an attack by an external agent upon a vulnerable human body in such a way that a wounding occurs' (Jones 2009, p. 12). Traumatic wounds can be visible, invisible, physical, or mental. What is particular to a contemporary understanding of trauma is that the experience is not merely located in the past and does not easily disappear. Rather, its appearance is cyclical and perennial; to the traumatised person, it comes from the future, as well as from the past. Jones underscores the scope and magnitude of a traumatic event, which can cause 'a loss of a sense of self, a breakdown in normal knowing and feeling, and a paralysing lack of agency in the threat of the harm suffered' (Jones 2009, p. 15).

So, what can a community constructed on *munus*, exposure, shakenness, or enacted vulnerability offer when people are confronted with trauma and wounds that will not heal? Reflecting on the visible scars on the body of the resurrected Jesus and the gospel narrative about 'doubting Thomas' (John 20:24–29), who would not believe until he could touch the Lord's bodily wounds, Shelly Rambo comments:

> The power of these resurrection appearances lie (sic) in their ability to offer a vision of wounds that turn us to the world in a particular way. Without an appeal to the seductive pull of promised endings, they can turn us to life in the midst of its complexities and uncertainties. (Rambo 2017, p. 150)

A truly inclusive community is a wounded community. This insight reflects many everyday experiences in diaconal practice. Often, despite all efforts, competence, and hopes, damages are not repaired, and healing, emancipation, and justice seem to be far beyond reach. Whether in situations of forced migration, addiction to substances, or life-threatening loneliness, diaconal practice frequently involves remaining with and witnessing the permanence of precarity and suffering. However, this does not call for resignation or new spiritual escapism, but, instead, to use Rambo's words, a recognition of wounds that 'turn us to the world in a particular way' (Rambo 2017, p. 150). It permits a different, more realistic approach to the 'complexities and uncertainties' that characterise any attempt to overcome the forces of fragmentation and death. Thus, Rambo also claims that it may facilitate 'visions of interconnectedness in perilous form, as a kind of epidemic of wounds. The wounds of one appeared on the body of another, as if improperly aligning experience and subject' (Rambo 2017, p. 153).

This, to my mind, mirrors a solidarity of the shaken: a community constituted not on common property, but on a common burden or debt and a shared vulnerability.

7. Conclusions

The aftermath of a contagious and deadly pandemic has brought to the fore the tension between inclusivity and exclusivity in the construction of community. This is particularly challenging for a Christian social practice (*diakonia*) that aims to resist isolation,

self-protection, and exclusion of otherness and instead develop efficacious strategies for building an inclusive community. In this article, I argue that exploring the tension between community and immunity in Roberto Esposito's thinking, considered in terms of recent contributions to a theology of vulnerability, can support self-reflection on diaconal practice in facing this challenge. Esposito elucidates that openness to otherness that exposes the personal and social body to external influence (both positive and negative) is a necessary ingredient for the protection of social and communitarian life. Based on my understanding of this logic, I suggest seeing the *munus* that connects and separates community and immunity as a fundamental vulnerability.

Contrary to conventional approaches, this implies conceiving vulnerability as vital for life in the community and thus imperative for diaconal and political actions that aim to promote inclusion and justice (Stålsett 2023). Such an approach to vulnerability in community may be seen as counterintuitive and countercultural, particularly in the wake of a global pandemic. Hence, I highlight Christian faith resources and contemporary theological reflections that facilitate such a framing of vulnerability. By celebrating faith in the divine incarnation of Jesus, as well as confessing God's salvific presence in Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, diaconal practice can present an understanding of vulnerability that promotes inclusive communities by seeing their principal protection in the life that flourishes in and through the presence of others. Thus, theological resources stemming from and nurturing diaconal practice can contribute to a different framing of human or even nonhuman experiences of life's precariousness. Thus, they may provide inspiration, direction, and strength for practices that endure and oppose precarity (i.e., numerous forms of violations of situational vulnerability).

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Notes

1   See: https://lutheranworld.org/what-we-do/churches-mission/diakonia-and-development/conviviality#:~:text=The%20term%20conviviality%20describes%20the%20key%20task%20for,solidarity%20and%20provides%20a%20vision%20for%20transformative%20change (accessed on 20 July 2023).

2   See the humanitarian statement issued by ecumenical and religious leaders together with the WHO, UNHCR, International Committee of the Red Cross, and Unicef on the 24 May 2021: https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/no-one-safe-until-everyone-safe-why-we-need-global-response-covid-19 (accessed on 20 July 2023).

3   The designation 'untact', which combines the prefix 'un' with the word 'contact', has also been used for 'doing things without direct contact with others, such as using self-service kiosks, shopping online, or making contactless payments', see https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200803-south-korea-contact-free-untact-society-after-coronavirus (accessed on 22 July 2023).

4   Marianne Moyaert sees this as similar to the dynamic play between appropriation and disappropriation in Paul Ricoeur's thinking. The reader can only appropriate the world of the text on the condition of disappropriating him- or herself. In this way, Moyaert comments, 'hermeneutical appropriation is not the expression of imperialism or colonisation but an expression of detachment and of letting go' (Moyaert 2012, p. 1157).

5   The Norwegian feminist theologian Gyrid Gunnes has also written poetically about God's vulnerability (Gunnes 2012). She depicts God as an old woman in the bathroom: «Gud er gammel på badekrakken: Hun skulle blødd denne dagen i måneden, men kroppen har tørket inn . . . Den nye tiden har rene neglebånd og klare meninger. Har den plass til en litt trist Gud i morgenkåpe på badekrakken? En som strekker ut hendene, ber om hjelp til å reise seg», ['God is old on the bath stool: She should have bled on this day of the month, but the body has dried up . . . The new age has clean cuticles and clear opinions. Does it have room for a slightly sad God in a dressing gown on the bath stool? One who stretches out her hands, asks for help to get up' (Gunnes 2012, p. 116).

6   This report on theological perspectives on *diakonia* was submitted by Carlos E. Ham on behalf of a WCC staff drafting group, at a conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka 2–6 June 2012. The group also included Deenabandhu Manchala, Dong-Sung Kim, and Jooseop Keum. The conference was jointly organised by the Justice and Diakonia, Just and Inclusive Communities, and Mission and Evangelism programmes of the World Council of Churches.

7   Tony Addy is head of education at the Interdiac—International Academy for Diaconia and Social Action.

8   It also bears a resemblance to contemporary theological reflections on 'the wounded healer' in, for instance, the works of Mercy A. Oduyoye (Oduyoye 2019) and Henry J. Nouwen (Nouwen 1979).

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