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II. Community Life in the Christian Tradition

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However, some superiors lack an understanding of their role and function in a community or circumscription or feel unprepared for it. This is shown in the inability to provide sufficient accompaniment for confreres or to follow procedures and decision-making processes in accordance with SRL. Some adopt an authoritarian leadership style; others adopt a more laissez-faire attitude and avoid taking decisions. Sometimes inflexibility, personal issues and hidden agendas get in the way, to the detriment of the overall good and interests of the community.

Some confreres seem averse to all authority and react negatively to any effort to dialogue about themselves and their mission. It may, however, be time to reflect also on how far the term “superior” corresponds to the Spiritan ministry of the service of authority.

For reflection

- a) *How do you understand the service of authority?*
- b) *What areas of improvement are needed?*

II. COMMUNITY LIFE IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Christian tradition, especially the experience of the apostles with Jesus, as well as that of the first Christian communities, underlines the primacy of community life.

2.1 THE COMMUNITY OF JESUS

One thing that is evident in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles is that the *raison d’être* of the community is that

the members are chosen by Jesus himself. He called the apostles to live with him. He is the Good Shepherd who brings together his flock, knows his sheep, takes care of them, especially the most vulnerable (cf. Jn 10, 4.11-14; Mt 18,12-14).

The call of the apostles is concomitant with the launching of Jesus' public ministry (Mt 4, 17; Mk 1,5). This means that the community life of Jesus and the disciples is a sign of the presence of the kingdom and a form of proclamation of the same kingdom: "that they may be one...so that the world may believe" (Jn 17, 21). It is evident that Jesus accords a singular importance to the community without neglecting the expression of individual strengths.

As sign and symbol of the kingdom, Jesus' community brings together people of different sensibilities and social origins. They are called to live and experience the new lifestyle that Jesus proposes to humanity. Fishermen journey together with the learned; civil servants (tax collectors), assimilated to the Roman colonial government, journey together with Judean freedom fighters. Their diversity shows that the fraternal life to which God invites humanity is not subject to human sentiments of the present moment, rather, the disciples have to be at the service of peace and unity announced by Jesus. This means that homogeneity is not a criterion for community life. Jesus invites all to enter into the dynamic of co-filiation, becoming brothers and sisters of Jesus, children of the same Father. It is this community that Jesus sends to preach the Good News (Mk 6,7-13).

The community of Jesus is characterised by the total self-giving of the members to one another. Hence the invitation to wash each other's feet and concretely forgive one another (cf. Jn 13,12-15). He commands the mutual love of one another (cf. Jn 13,31-35) and gives the supreme example through his total self-donation (cf. Jn 15,9-12). He is proud to call them friends (cf. Jn

15, 13-15) and reminds them that they owe friendship and care to one another. Gradually, Jesus forms his community to be the premise of a new humanity that announces the kingdom, that is already but not yet.

However, Jesus does not minimise the conflicts inherent in such a community. First, the apostles contest his action or non-action (cf. Jn 4,27; Mk 4,38; Lk 18,15-17). There is unhealthy competition among them (cf. Lk 22, 24-30). Many times, Jesus scolds them for their lack of faith which perturbs their community life and the preaching of the Gospel (cf. Mk 10,42-45; Lk 9,52-56). The Gospels show that the search for harmony and unity in the community goes hand-in-hand with the search for solutions to conflicts which arise from confrontations based on differences of origin and the character of persons.

To form a community according to the spirit of Jesus is to bring people of different sensibilities, cultures and origins to espouse a common project, to be brothers, sisters and friends of Jesus, children of the same Father for the birth of a new humanity. Jesus prays for them so that they may be one (cf. Jn 17, 11) because their unity is a proof of the authenticity of his mission, a gauge of the credibility of his identity: his unity with the Father and the Holy Spirit as the basis for the unity of humanity. The risen Christ confirms this community project of co-filiation by his injunction to Mary of Madgala when he says: "...go and find the brothers, and tell them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." (Jn 20, 17-18).

2.2 THE NEW TESTAMENT COMMUNITIES

*T*he memory of Jesus pushed the first Christians to organise their communities around four principal axes: a) the

teaching of the apostles; b) the witness of life; c) service to others through fraternal sharing and solidarity; d) the liturgical practice of the sharing of bread (cf. Acts 2, 42-47). This ideal is presented as being of one heart and one soul (cf. Acts 4, 32), *cor unum et anima una*.

However, some instances show that this ideal met with counter witnesses and difficulties. Think of the case of the couple, Ananias and Saphira (cf. Acts 5,1-11). Other crises like the discrimination against widows of non-Jewish origin and those of the diaspora (cf. Acts 6,1-6), would challenge the fidelity of the community to the vision of Christ. Nevertheless, the texts show the apostles' readiness to resolve these conflicts according to Jesus's principles and thus safeguard unity, fraternity and solidarity within the community (cf. Acts, 6,1-6; Acts 15, 1-29).

The concern for unity runs through the Pauline tradition. The new communities born in different geographic areas, cultures and times had to reflect on the consequences of being the body of Christ (cf. Rm 12,4-5). Fragile communities faced the danger of disintegration (cf. 2 Co 12, 20-21). Paul reminds them that being Christian is realised through commitment to forming one body in Christ with others. Other epistles express the same teaching. For example, James denounces the divisions and internal wars (cf. James 4,1-2) in the community. John reaffirms the concern for fraternal love (cf. 1Jn 4,1-12) as the unique way of experiencing co-filiation (cf. 1Jn 3,1-3) echoing the words of the Psalmist: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Ps 133,1). Community witness is integral to mission.

2.3 COMMUNITY LIFE IN CHURCH DOCUMENTS

Christian tradition, as portrayed in Church documents, emphasizes community life as the usual form taken by consecrated life. This is translated as the readiness to sacrifice oneself for others according to the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The 2nd Vatican Council observed that creation has a community motive: “God did not create for life in isolation but for the formation of social unity.”⁹ Likewise, salvation has a community dimension. God does not want to save human beings merely as individuals but as a people.¹⁰ It is through this experience that the Church is called the people of God, the family of God, sign and symbol of the union of God with humanity.¹¹

The Decree on the Renewal of Consecrated Life, *Perfectae caritatis*, underlines community life as the expression of the Christian mystery which witnesses to the presence of Christ in the world.¹² It also highlights the strong connection between mission and community living, and even goes on to say that, in certain situations, congregations may have to abandon “those works which today are less relevant to the spirit and authentic nature of the community” (PC 20).

Later on, expanding the teaching of Vatican II, Pope Saint John Paul II, in *Vita Consecrata*, presented fraternal life in community

⁹ *Gaudium et Spes* 32.

¹⁰ *Lumen gentium* 9.

¹¹ *Lumen gentium* 1.

¹² *Perfectae caritatis* 12.

as “an eloquent sign of ecclesial communion.”¹³ He argued that, in the light of the first Christian communities, community life is lived concretely through sharing everything in common: material goods and spiritual experiences, talents and inspirations, apostolic ideals and charitable service. In a world torn apart by ethnic hatred and senseless violence, fraternal life in community is presented as a sign of the spiritual communion to which humanity is called: “Placed as they are within the world's different societies (...) communities of consecrated life, where persons of different ages, languages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, are signs that dialogue is always possible and that communion can bring differences into harmony.”¹⁴ Furthermore, *Vita Consecrata* emphasises the role of the superior as one who guides his brothers in the apostolic and spiritual life, whose task is “essential for strengthening fraternal communion and in order not to render vain the obedience professed.”¹⁵

These reflections are further deepened by Pope Francis. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he underlines the fact that community does not annihilate differences, but that fraternity in community is open to the complementarity of differences. Individuality and personal identity are not suppressed by the community, “instead they receive new impulses to personal growth.”¹⁶ This requires dialogue and attentiveness to one another. Therefore, Pope Francis goes on to point out that authentic relationships in community develop through deep communication where each person is allowed to share his/her personal story without fear of being judged and cajoled. Echoing the thoughts of Pope

¹³ *Vita consecrata* 42.

¹⁴ *Vita consecrata* 51.

¹⁵ *Vita consecrata* 43.

¹⁶ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24th November 2013, n° 235.

Francis, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life emphasizes that through prayer, especially the Eucharist, the members of the community can come to experience the humanizing power of the Gospel which is expressed through mutual respect, kindness and joy: “The community that sits at table and recognizes Jesus in the breaking of bread (cf. Lk 24:13-35) is also the place in which each one recognizes his frailty: Fraternity does not produce perfect relationships, but welcomes the limitations of all and takes them to heart and to prayer as a wound inflicted on the commandment of love (cf. Jn 13:31-35): a place where the pascal mystery brings healing and where unity grows.”¹⁷

For reflection

- a) *What do you learn from the community of Jesus and that of the first Christians?*
- b) *How do you handle the tension between unity and diversity in your communities and circumscriptions?*

III. COMMUNITY LIFE IN THE SPIRITAN TRADITION

Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann placed community at the centre of Spiritan life. While Poullart des Places sees community as the best place to form future apostolic workers, Libermann makes it the essential dimension of the apostolic missionary life.

¹⁷ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Keep Watch, Year of Consecrated Life*, Rome 2014, p. 55.