

“Fraternal life, space for Human Development”

I would like to begin this reflection by quoting some passages from what Pope Francis writes in the Apostolic Exhortation *‘Evangelii Gaudium’*¹ speaking not to religious but to all Christians, who, because of their intimate union with Christ, are called by vocation to create a new type of community, of fraternity and communion generated by the Spirit. These texts, read from the perspective of Consecrated Life, which has one of its essential elements in the Fraternal Community, are even more significant and meaningful.

“Today, when the networks and tools of human communication have reached developments hitherto unheard of, we feel the challenge of discovering and transmitting the "mystique" of living together, of mixing, of meeting, of taking each other's hand, of supporting one another, of participating in this seemingly chaotic tide that can turn into a true experience of fraternity, into a caravan of solidarity, into a holy pilgrimage ... *Coming out of oneself to join others is healthy for us.*”² (EG, 87).

“The Christian ideal will always invite us to overcome suspicion, permanent distrust, fear of being invaded. It helps also to overcome the defensive attitudes that the present world imposes on us ... This is important because since some would like a purely spiritual Christ, without flesh and without a cross, they also demand interpersonal relationships mediated only by sophisticated devices, screens and systems that can be turned on and off at will. In the meantime, the Gospel always invites us to run the risk of looking into each other's face, with the physical presence of the other that questions, with his pain and his requests, with his contagious joy in a constant exchange ...” (EG, 88).

“Isolation, which is a version of immanentism, can be expressed in a false autonomy that excludes God but which can also find in the religious a form of spiritual consumerism within the reach of his morbid individualism ...” (EG, 89).

“An important challenge is to show that the solution will never consist of escaping from a personal and committed relationship with God, who at the same time engages us with others. This is what happens today when believers try to hide and remove themselves from the sight of others, and when they subtly escape from one place to another or from one task to another, without creating deep and stable bonds ... It is necessary to help the religious to recognize that the only way forward is to learn to meet their brothers and sisters with the right attitude, appreciating them and accepting them as fellow travellers, without inner resistance. Better still, it is about learning to discover Jesus in the face of others, in their voice, in their requests. It is also learning to suffer in an embrace with the crucified Jesus when we suffer unjust aggression or ingratitude, *never getting tired of choosing fraternity.*”³ (EG, 91).

“... true healing ... is a mystical, contemplative fraternity that knows how to look at the sacred value of others, that knows how to discover God in every human being, knows how to endure the harassment of living together by clinging to the love of God, and knows how to open the heart to divine love to seek the happiness

¹ FRANCISCO, exhortación apostólica *Evangelii gaudium* (EG). AAS 105 (2013) 1019-1137. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, consultado 01-12-2017.

² La corsiva è personale.

³ *Idem.*

of others as their good Father seeks theirs... *Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the community!*"⁴ (EG, 92).

1. Fraternal Life in Fraternal Communities

The understanding and the evaluation of the internal life of the religious community today is not simple. There are many aspects that need to be brought into focus and solved with criteria of faith, but also in a pragmatic way: the service of authority, co-responsibility and participation, interpersonal relationships, the relationship between work and life or religious community and the management of the work, the balance between community project and personal charisma, the sphere of privacy and communication between generations. It is not easy to face all of them because they all require different insights. On the other hand, managing them with maturity involve various people, for whom a group reflection is preferable to individual counselling. They require attitudes and efforts whereby those with greater talents can often compensate for the inevitable limitations of others: it is the labour of love that adapts, accompanies, is patient, offers possibilities, awaits the favourable personal moment and orients forward. While human knowledge or approaches are useful, not everything can be solved with a technical solution. The profession of brotherly love is the basis of everything.

Some changes have surely modified the life of the community and will continue to do so in the future.

In the first place *the composition*: the number of confreres per community has decreased and, in some cases, it is minimal. Even in small communities, people belong to different generations. In fact, sometimes there is a larger presence of elderly members. This, of course is not bad, especially if it is lived in a positive way, as a possibility for greater personalization and responsibility. The elderly can witness to the experience of life lived according to the charism. However, such a composition requires new capacity for particular relationships and attitudes.

A second change is about *the relationship between community and apostolic work*. The religious have no longer exclusively responsibility for the work, and not all the members of the religious community are involved in the work. Some are more and more involved in the work while others are already retired. We feel the disproportion between religious personnel and the size of the work. The work had begun when many confreres were available; then, a little at a time, the number dwindled and is now reaching the limit. Consequently, there is abundant interchange between religious and lay people who hold responsibilities in the works.

A third change is the *greater involvement of the community in the affairs of the local Church a closer relationship with the environment in the neighbourhood*. Consecrated Life is seen not as a "withdrawal", but as an insertion in life with a contribution and a mission. Consequently, there is a multiplication of relationships and interchanges with those living on the outside. Hence, there is less time for the community which is becoming less reserved and protected, as it being more drawn by the complexity of life and by the stimuli coming from this context.

⁴ *Idem*.

However, the most important change is *the change from the insistence on life in common to that of fraternal life in communion*. This requires greater consideration of the individual person in his originality, more space for him to express himself, a search for quality relationships and active participation in the life of the group.

I think that the two terms clarify the idea and differentiate its scope. Life in common means doing the same things at the same time (gathering, praying, eating, working, etc.). For the common life, the '*all together*' was important. Fraternal life in communion means paying more attention to the union of people, to the fraternity of relationships, to mutual help and support, to the convergence of intents, and sharing of the project. This corresponds to the cultural climate and the new awareness of people that require greater recognition, value and active participation. It is obvious that when we speak of the *prophecy of working together*, we do not think of simply 'working together', but of the prophecy of witnessing to a communion of intent and sharing of the educative and pastoral project.

This stems from a vision of faith: in fact, it finds its profound origin and reason in the Trinitarian mystery, in the call to follow Christ, and it is an expression and a sign of the reality of the Church. Our communion is an expression of the Trinitarian communion: "*As the Father has loved me, I too have loved you. Remain in my love*" (Jn 15: 9). Hence, our mission is a participation in the Trinitarian mission: "*As the Father has sent me, I also send you*". (Jn 20:21)

In addition to the vision of faith, which must always be deepened, the desire to form a true family among adults requires a new form of conceiving and building personal relationships: finding the foundations on which to set them upon, seeking ways to renew them before they become permanently worn out, and to make them satisfying for individuals concerned. Article 51 of the Constitutions says: "In an atmosphere of fraternal friendship we communicate joys and sorrows and share co-responsibly experiences and apostolic projects".

Therefore, I believe that there are *two urgent themes* in fraternal life: that of relationships and that of communication. They are like two great community dynamics that gravitate others factors around them, such as co-responsibility, planning, discernment, and the like. All are facilitated and made possible by the first two themes.

1. 1. Interpersonal relationships

Interpersonal relationships are one of the tests or parameters of a person's maturity. Indeed, perhaps its main indicator, where the qualities and limits of people are reflected. Therefore, today we pay particular attention to them in formation; and not only from the formal point of view, but also looking at the substantial and interior aspect. The possibility of a peaceful life with the brothers and also that of a shared fruitful pastoral action depend largely on them.

Speaking of candidates to the priesthood, *Optatam Totius* says that a certain human maturity must be demanded in them⁵. It also lists certain traits or signs.

⁵ cfr. *Optatam Totius* n. 11

- a. First and foremost, is the *stability of the soul*, which frees us from sudden changes or unjustified shifting moods, orientations, convictions, life plans, and in evaluation criteria. We all have had experiences of unstable people, particularly among adolescents. And the fact that these variations abound among adolescents, says something.
- b. The Document (OT) then places the stress on the *capacity to carefully evaluate* events and people: the maturity of the judgment that knows how to take all aspects into consideration according to their importance, protects itself against the excessive influence of one's subjectivity and avoids being hasty; above all it is placed in the perspective of the well-being of people, of love, and of the Kingdom.
- c. Thirdly, *the relationships* are further qualified: the aptitude to establish profound and altruistic relationships; the capability of their duration and of enhancing people, that is, of selfless generosity and open to the good of others, based on non-selfish motivations.

According to a current assessment done by experts, most of the internal difficulties at work or in ideas arise basically due to interpersonal problems that have work or ideas only as their battleground. These are personalities who tend to impose themselves, to centre everything in themselves. Furthermore, there are those who feel nothing or little recognized or valued. This fact is not noticed by the interested parties. With a single word we bundle them together as “*badly set relationships*” between individuals and between individuals and groups.

For example, just to recall some concrete facts: some may come with expectations that are not being fulfilled. This occurs with those who come with certain plans and promises and then later may bitterly realize that the community does not fulfil them. Perhaps these wishes were excessive by those who entered into the new community.

There are also the expectations of the community, or individuals in it, about the new member. In this case too, things do not always go as expected. A director thinks that whoever arrives could serve him for some particular goal or even support him in animating the community. On the other hand, it may turn out that the person may not fit well into what was being expected of him.

Furthermore, we must not forget the impact of the first impression, which can create difficulties if it is not moderated, adjusted and overcome. In the community there could be groups that do not facilitate the entry of a new member. Whoever enters it must adapt, and perhaps necessarily adapt himself to a certain mentality, to certain types of action and styles of relationships. There is a tendency in these groups to defend themselves and thus condition the new person. Moreover, it is all the tougher if those who form the groups are authoritative in terms of age, know-how and role. This is then noticed in dialogue, in daily life, and even in assemblies or community meetings.

There may also be, on the part of those who suffer from conditioning, the intention not to open up: “I keep to myself; I do not expose myself!” All this does not always involve subjective guilt. Indeed, for this person some of these attitudes could even be needed in conscience. It is rather the human, personal universe that escapes him; that is, he does not grasp what such an attitude means for himself, for others and for the group.

Badly set up relationships, not positively resolved during conflicts.

For example, this arises when for any reason the person believes that they have suffered some form of disrespect or have not felt listened to and understood. It could also occur when whoever spoke to them was not clear about the things upon which they expected clarity or did not support him or did not give them sufficient time so that they could mature in their decision.

These are all causes for conflicting situations, either declared or silent, resolved or swept under the carpet. They can happen to everyone, even to those who are most incapable of being provoked or are more willing to avoid them. However, in any case, the relationship must be reconstructed so that a solution in line with the Word of God is to be found.

Unresolved, unhealed and unreconciled conflicts (without making up, explaining oneself or restoring confidence or taken with a sense of humour) can fester within the person and block the process of maturation within them. This then creates difficulties in their serene and joyful donation to the mission and to God. Sadness and discomfort are harmful in every sense.

Internal bitterness wears one out. For this reason, a great ministry of charity is to help dissolve them, to seek its roots, to see it as a personal limitation and to face it calmly, without remaining fixed there. And how many confreres can be found stuck in an unresolved conflict! Reconciliation is truly a sign of wisdom and a source of peace.

On the other hand, no one can expect only to receive from the community, as if it were a ready-made warm nest. Assisted by the grace of God, the community is the result of the efforts of all who strive to create a healthy climate and a web of relationships. Whoever pulls back from this or opts to stay out remains without the goods that circulate here. Probably everyone gets from the community a response that conforms to the "signs" he has given. If he gives, he receives; if he proves to be eager for help, he is supported; if he moves to get in, he is taken in.

Hence, the conclusion is: to educate individuals to be continuously open to relationships in different ways, even with a simple word, by offering support or some other form of encouragement. At the same time, we need to make up for the shortcomings of some reluctant ones, by means of a greater effort to go out to them, to meet them, to reopen relationships. In communities there are often limits in communication, and excessive reverence which then curbs familiarity. Blessed are those confreres who, faced with this limitation, are ready to take the extra step for a little more conversation, joy and closeness, so that the level of community life, mutual affection and family environment, do not diminish.

It is necessary therefore, to animate our relations. It is an aspect of the charity of the Rector as the builder of communion. Even those who have difficulties manage to overcome them and grow if they are offered opportunities and means to express themselves without anxiety, without being condemned by others.

1. 2. Communication

Linked to the issue of relationships, there is the communication: the *willingness and the capacity to communicate and to share about oneself*. We speak here of day-to-day communication, sharing easily our experiences and of the ability to listen to those who live with us.

Valuing communication in right measure, knowing its laws and its obstacles without falling into technicalities is important for everyone, but especially for those who have to create an adequate platform, namely:

- to plan the *flow* of communication, not only vertically from those in authority towards those who are below them and from these towards them; but also providing circular and multidirectional communication among all;
- to generously *distribute* the "roles" of communication to all: not splitting them into just those who process the communication and to others who are only compliant recipients;
- to render communication satisfying to all: on what do we communicate? To what extent do we involve ourselves in communication?

Communication expresses itself in easy dialogue, in free and peaceful confrontation at times, in spontaneous communication of feelings, ideas, projects and preferences, in the smooth coordination of co-responsibilities, in common checks, in the personal interviews and in the spiritual dialogue.

We immediately notice that the *levels of communication* are different.

- There is a *level* that is negative, that is, *below zero*: it is *absence*, silent aggression, ignoring the existence of the other, even if he lives under the same roof and eats at the same table: "For me, it is as if you were not there!" Sometimes we have heard an angry confrere say that he will not argue anymore, he will no longer try to agree or reconcile. However, he will behave with his brother as if they lived in two different worlds. However, often the decision not to speak, to flee or to simply ignore occurs without any prior declaration. On the other hand, there is also a less dramatic, accepted and benevolent communication. Think of so many family situations today, where you are: they don't fight, or contradict one another's ideas, tastes and projects, but they don't even have the intention to share what we care about in common.

As we know, lack of communication is one of the big defects within our era of mass communication. It is so strange to perceive that good mass communicators fail in personal communication with those who are close to them. Some suicides or the depression of some famous people are there to prove this.

- Then there is a nominal level, *just above zero*: it is *superficial communication*. Here we talk about the most banal things, which are indifferent or distant to us, so as not to keep our mouth shut. It is always better than silence and communication because at least one wants to live together with the others in peace, one does not wish to be rude and thus tries to make the company happy. In so doing, one comments about the weather, the events heard on the TV, characters in films or in sports. It is an acceptable platform for a good neighbourhood, at least it is a first step. However, one knows that we talk about all of these things even with a stranger sitting next to us on the train or on the plane.
- Between us there could be nothing more than a *functional communication*: how we do it, how to improve it, organize times, roles, tasks. It is a sign of co-responsibility and generally has a correct form. But there is a risk of remaining there in our relationship with the confreres and young people. One of the most recurrent corrections suggested to the communities is that

they do not consider themselves, or allow themselves to be seen from the outside, only as a work team.

- At the highest level there is *personal communication*, in which we share the experience of our vocation. We exchange evaluations, needs, and intuitions that concern our life in Christ and our way of understanding the charism. It is what many times involves our life review, the verification of our community, the exchange in prayer, the discernment of our projects or events.

The present times have made communication in religious communities more necessary and have changed the criteria and methods. The complexity of life requires that we confront family tendencies, criteria, events and facts external to it: either we manage to understand and interpret them, or we are increasingly outside the life and movement of the world.

For this we must elaborate common evaluation criteria. Often this requires a journey that involves exploration and testing. We must be willing to express ourselves with simplicity, to show ourselves always ready to change judgments and positions, even for the sole purpose of fraternal and operational convergence. When essential values are not compromised, mediating always benefits the community.

Communication is also necessary because of the positive pluralism of visions and gifts that are present within the community: there are gifts of intelligence, of spirit, of imagination, of practical skills to communicate. Moreover, the topics upon which to communicate profitably about in Consecrated Life are many: the apostolic project, the spiritual experience, the challenges of the mission, the guidelines of the Congregations, the tendencies of the Church.

Communication requires learning, practice, and also animation. It requires spiritual *learning* more than technical knowledge. When communicating at certain levels one reveals oneself. My personal experience tells me that not everyone has the courage to show who one is. It also takes mature knowledge to be able to receive communication, without judging the person, without placing one in a definitive pigeon hole based on what one has expressed.

There is also a certain shyness that still needs to be overcome, about which we don't want to tell each other; there is still trust in the other which needs to be consolidated and which then reassures me that the other confrere will welcome positively and with maturity what I will share.

Besides learning how to communicate, it also takes *practice*. When the capacity to communicate is neglected, it rusts. Taste and training are lost. Practice leads to the understanding of different languages adapted to situations, ranging from silence and gestures to the written word. All are to be inspired by charity and not by technical calculation. Remember Don Bosco with his hand on the head of a boy, smiling, looking, saying a word in his ear, giving a good night, maintaining a dialogue with those like Domenico Savio, asking for opinions, discussing. "Learn to smile", some of our directors were advised. This is the effort, so typical of the Preventive System, to openly express affection, to free it from the generic and enclosed interiority.

It therefore takes learning and practice on the part of everyone, but it also takes *animation* on the part of the director to create the appropriate climate for a serene and easy communication. Give opportunities to communicate; have a

management style in which it is easy to express opinions, request and provoke such opinions, enjoy the multiplicity of contributions, make it clear that the person will not be judged for what he says in a moment of confrontation. Underline the fact that there is to be no fear that if an idea is manifested or an unwelcome opinion is expressed about work or the community, or about the congregation, that this will be remembered, particularly when this is often simply a passage in dialogue, an impression that one wants to verify.

Therefore, a style of direction is needed; a style based on tolerance and receptivity. We must get used to hearing unexpected and unusual ideas and perspectives.

2. Relations and Communication to grow in Maturity

Relations and communication help not only to feel good, but also to grow. Both enrich us from a cultural, psychological, social and even spiritual point of view.

There is a *cultural* growth, because by listening to others we receive information, visions, data and readings of various realities. Just think how much healthy relationships and good communication with competent people are sought after! Indeed, probably everyone in the community has some wealth to offer us.

There is a *psychological* growth, because affectivity develops the capacity and the mentality to welcome other people; we become more able to give of ourselves and to overcome frustrations, internal blockages, and fixations on ourselves or on our success.

There is *social* growth, because it strengthens the ability to work in groups and to participate in teams and in various setups with freedom and honesty. Social anxiety, the feeling of strangeness and discomfort, which at times assail us in unknown or unfamiliar groups, are thus overcome.

Finally, and above all, there is a *spiritual* or overall growth, because the attitudes and aptitudes mentioned above are part of an effort to respond to the Lord in accordance with the charism in a qualified way.

What we have been saying applies also to the educative community. This is a wider field of exercise of pastoral charity for what concerns relationships and communication, and there are decisive consequences on education and evangelization. We will not stop to develop this theme, because it would require a whole conversation.

Relations and communication therefore need processes of training and growth. Not everyone understands this at present. No one is to blame because in earlier formative practices, communication had neither the weight nor the current possibilities. While we do not blame anyone, we must be able to create and multiply opportunities for communication, to discuss the issue of relationships, to be aware of the platforms they require, and to treat it as a practice of pastoral charity towards confreres and communities.

3. For a Pedagogy of Communion

Like all values, communion and solidarity are not instinctive and natural facts. Rather, the search for self, egocentrism, individualism, self-referentiality, to which we are more easily inclined, due to our weakness, are more natural. The

spirit of communion, the only way leading towards human and spiritual maturation, on the other hand, requires learning, with precise rules, long times and well-defined stages. It also needs an educational strategy, which has its rhythms and spaces.

Precisely because these family and community values are not sufficiently built into the personality structure of individuals, a formative itinerary of a *pedagogy of communion*, especially in the initial stages of formation, is necessary to have. It needs to be done with a more intentional, more focused and more propositional initiation, and needs to be the result of a pedagogical and a formative project, that has been appropriately studied, having detailed objectives, intermediate stages, operative tools, and qualifying experiences.

If the tiles in a mosaic have fallen, it is necessary to put them back in their right place once again. If the pieces of the puzzle are scattered, it is necessary to reassemble them, put them back together, in the organization of a unitary whole. If the constituent elements of the family and the community are dispersed, it is necessary to recover them through a communal spirit and a search for unity. If the chain of transmission of values is broken, it is indispensable to reassemble it starting from the person's founding experiences: acceptance, recognition and respect for one's individuality, acceptance of one's own and others' limitations, and the commitment to share and live together.

3.1. In a Trinitarian and ecclesial perspective

In his precious and illuminating speech, Fr. Castellano writes:

“When we speak of communion, there emerges a clear reference to the Trinitarian archetype, to the life circulating in the Mystical Body, to the sense of brotherhood and family of God, to the requirement that the communion of persons in the Church reproduces: that ideal icon of Pentecost which is both the opposite of faceless conglomeration and narcissistic individualism. The Church, and every community in the Church, is not the sum of self-enclosed individualisms. It is not the anonymity of a faceless conglomeration. It is the Church of Pentecost, where each person - touched by the single flame of the Spirit, revealing his name and face - indicates that the grace of communion is precisely the free movement of convergence of persons and the free assumption of the mission, in the image of the Trinity, the ineffable communion of Persons»⁶.

The grace of communion, which calls for the commitment to build serene, active, and purposeful brotherhood, helps us to embody God's plan in the human history of our communities and families. This assists us in building the Church, the icon of the Trinity, that will attract everyone to itself, by the divine beauty expressed through the mystery of communion.

A true “*spirituality of communion*”⁷ then becomes a primary and radical condition. It is defined by John Paul II as a

“the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see on the faces of the brothers and

⁶ J. CASTELLANO CERVERA, *Mistica e ascesi della comunione*: Religiosi in Italia 329 (marzo-abril 2002) 67.

⁷ JUAN PABLO II, exhortación apostólica postinodal *Vita Consecrata*, 51. AAS 88 (1996) 424 (377-486).
http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata.html, consultato el 01-12-2017.

sisters around us ... It also means an ability to feel of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as “those who are part of me”⁸.

From here, some very practical consequences follow, such as for example sharing in the joys and sorrows of the brothers, guessing their desires, taking care of their needs, offering them a true and profound friendship, seeing all the positive and beautiful things that God has sown in their lives, and welcoming this as a gift from God to us, knowing how to make room for the brothers and carrying together the burdens of one another⁹.

3.2. In a unified and unifying life

The work of reunification implies qualifying those elements of life that have a ‘sacramental’ value in building communion: the Word of God, which is above all the book of the community, in the same way that this is the community of the Book; the celebration of the Eucharist; the moments of formation; the community dialogue, and the moments of life review.

Education to communion develops through a renewed and persevering commitment to it along with others. It is also an opening of our identity. We need to overcome the fear of relating with others as this fear can sometimes endanger our intimacy and our *blessed* solitude.

Therefore, so that communion may acquire concreteness and depth, it requires a daily community asceticism, which requires these *three* essential movements:

- *identification*, that is, feeling a sense of “belonging to”, constituting a strongly communal “we”, which does not yield to easy divisions, which does not hide behind the petty “you” that divides into good and bad, and which knows how to patiently make communion even in apparent failures.

- *solidarity*, resulting from the sharing of ideals and programs and in the readiness and availability in executing them. It leads to avoiding escaping when the boat is filling up with water. Indeed, it is a human virtue, with an extraordinary evangelical force.

- *participation*, that is, communion that is embodied in the various aspects of ordinary life: a participation that is generous, leading towards total availability, and responsibility, because each one watches over what has been entrusted to him and intending to collaborate in teamwork with others¹⁰.

Communion demands all our spiritual energies, all the evangelical and human virtues. It requires perseverance in goodness, in the pursuit of community and holiness and in doing God's will. «Communion is born precisely from the

⁸ JUAN PABLO II, carta apostólica *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43. AAS 93 (2001) 296-297 (266-309).

http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html, consultato el 01-12-2017.

⁹ CONGREGACIÓN PARA LOS INSTITUTOS DE VIDA CONSAGRADA Y LAS SOCIEDADES DE VIDA APOSTÓLICA, *Istruzione Ripartire da Cristo*, 29.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_20020614_ripartire-da-cristo_sp.html, consultato el 01-12-2017.

¹⁰ J. CASTELLANO, o.c., 77-78

sharing of the goods of the Spirit, a sharing of faith and in faith, where the bond of fraternity is all the stronger, all the more central, and all the more vital».¹¹

It would be dangerous to call for ideals, without educating people to constant donation, to responsibility in building communion day after day, in a dynamic of charity that asks for nothing less than the gift of life, according to Jesus' words: «no one has greater love than he who gives his life for those he loves» (See Jn 15, 13).

It is therefore essential to create a favourable and proactive atmosphere, that makes every member feel at home. It also demands generous participation, reciprocal communion, investment of effort, time, and personal qualities that make people grow, overcoming the hidden formalisms and pretension that others must do everything. True love carries in it the mark of the cross.

4. The 'Utopia' of FRATERNITY according to the Gospel

If you observe Religious Life today, it is easy to realize that community life is one of the dimensions that can have the greatest prophetic force, but alas at present it is perhaps the weakest aspect, and one that causes the abandonment from this way of life of religious men and women.

If on the one hand, we have grown in our commitment to *live our community life in a more authentic way*, on the other hand, it is also true that behind the outward respect and tolerance we can see the indifference and the lack of care towards confreres. Comfort and activism lead us to believe that the time dedicated to the community was actually 'stolen' from our 'private space' or from the mission. If we find God's radical call difficult it is because of our weak belief in communion.

At the same time, we hopefully recognize that *community life* is a privileged road of *human maturation* and of the *experience of God*. As Pope Francis repeats, living the "mysticism of fraternity" is an essential element of our apostolic consecration. All this supposes that we pass from living a common life to abiding in a communion of life, leading us from simply living side by side with one another, to achieving that communion we all need and long for.

Certainly, as one author has written, community life has "all the enchantment of what is difficult and of what is possible, of grace and weakness. Only with the grace of God does one remain in community and deepen this experience ... And it is a penance and an asceticism that purifies. But above all, it is also an enchantment. We are in the community to be happy and there are many who succeed (...) and if we want to talk about the enchantment of community life, we must say a word about the practical demands of brotherly love. This presupposes presence, reciprocal affection, fraternal correction, and taking an interest in one another by helping one another. Ultimately, this the unfolding of brotherly love, because the heart both asks and demands. *The community life of the future will be fraternal or not at all*¹². This is one of the ingredients that today's candidates are looking for, and which they do not readily find."¹³

¹¹ CONGREGAZIONE PER GLI ISTITUTI DI VITA CONSAGRATA E LE SOCIETÀ DI VITA APOSTOLICA, *La vita fraterna in comunidad*, 32.

¹³ J. M. ARNAIZ, *¡Qué ardan nuestros corazones. Devolver el encanto a la vida consagrada!*, Publicaciones Claretianas, Madrid 2007, 95. La frase in corsiva è scelta personale. El autor no la ha resaltado de manera especial.

5. “... it is not we who loved God, but God loved us” (1 Jn 4: 10)

Undoubtedly, the core of community life is charity, love. But to build a community, it is necessary to first *start from the person*. The document on the Service of Authority indicates the following:

“*Authority is called to promote the dignity of the person, paying attention to each member of the community and to his/her journey of growth, offering each one the gift of his own esteem and positive consideration, nurturing a sincere affection towards everyone, guarding the secret of what has been entrusted to him. It should be remembered that before invoking obedience (which may be required), one must practice charity (which is indispensable)*”¹⁴ (n. 13).

God calls us to live in community, giving us brothers to love. This is absolutely true, but perhaps also incomplete, and can make us forget something essential. Both in the order of nature and in that of Grace, “*being loved*” precedes “*loving*”; even more: “*knowing*” and “*feeling*” loved, because they are not always the same.

There is much to be said about this trait of the “phenomenology of love”. One of the greatest authors in this regard, Josef Pieper, cites none other than Jean-Paul Sartre, who states: “This is the heart of the joy of love: that in him we feel justified our being” and Pieper continues:

“It is not seen from the point of view of the lover, but from that of the loved one. From what is seen, it is not enough for us simply to exist, what interests us is the confirmation of being: “*it's nice that you exist*”; “*how wonderful that you are here!*” In other words: what we need, in addition to existence, is to be loved by another person [...]. And, as surprising as it may seem, this reality is confirmed by the most elementary experience, by what every person experiences and lives every day. It is said that a person *blossoms* “when he feels loved. Only at that moment he seems to be in his being, and he starts *a new life*».¹⁵

Continuing this idea, he added:

“I imagine that in our educational and pastoral work, we have all lived this experience with young people, and it is one of the deepest and most authentic joys to experience. In other words: until we feel loved by someone, we are ashamed to be in this world, like being at a party to which we were not invited. But when one loves us, as Sartre said above, “our existence is justified”, and in the pedagogical experience, the change that follows, even on the external, is often extraordinary”.

Undoubtedly, this should always have its roots (at least it is so, in God's wonderful plan) in family life. Family is supposed to be the optimal environment imaginable for a creature that comes into the world where they feel loved,

¹⁴ CONGREGAZIONE PER GLI ISTITUTI DI VITA CONSAGRATA E LE SOCIETÀ DI VITA APOSTOLICA, istruzione *Il servizio della autorità e l'obediienza. Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram*, 13.
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_20080511_aurita-obbedienza_sp.html, consultato il 01-12-2017.

¹⁵ J. PIEPER, *Amor*, en: IDEM, *Las Virtudes Fundamentales*, Madrid, Rialp, 2001, 446.

accepted and protected. When this does not happen, it is impossible to fill that almost congenital, emotional void.

Above all, I would also like to apply this insight to our community life, and in particular to the mission of the superior within it. How many confreres are unable to love, perhaps because they do not *feel* loved in the community, they feel that they are not taken into consideration and hence do not show any sense of belonging to the community! Sometimes, it can depend on factors as simple as the image that they project of themselves, or the irrelevance of the tasks they perform.

This does not happen only in the human sphere: how many times Christians understand their lives as a duty, that is, “to love and serve God”, waiting for Him to correspond to us, to have mercy on us and save us. In reality, it is in reverse: “*we love, because He loved us first*” (1 John 4:19).

The Message of Lent that Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has left us as a testament of his pontificate is very much along the same line:

“Faith constitutes the personal commitment - which includes all our faculties - to the revelation of gratuitous and passionate love that God has for us and which is fully manifested in Jesus Christ [...] The Christian is a person conquered by the love of Christ and moved by this love, *caritas Christi urget nos* (2 Cor 5:14). He is open in a profound and concrete way to the love of neighbour. This attitude derives mainly from the knowledge that the Lord loves us, forgives us, bends down to wash our feet and gives Himself on the cross to bring the love of God humanity.

The whole Christian life is nothing but responding to the love of God. The first response is precisely faith, to welcome a divine initiative that precedes and surprises us full of wonder and gratitude. And the “yes” of faith marks the beginning of a luminous story of friendship with the Lord, which fills our whole existence and gives it full meaning»¹⁶.

In the concrete life of the community, we find the convergence of both aspects: fraternal love comes undoubtedly from God; but it also becomes real and perceptible in the community. Only in community do we find an answer to the profound aspirations of the heart.

Here we find the structural elements of our life: fraternal charity, the apostolic mission, and the practice of the evangelical counsels around community life. They are the bonds that shape our unity and continually strengthen our communion. Thus, we form a single heart and a single soul, to love and serve God and help one another.

This requires that the community welcomes the brother with an open heart, accepting him as he is, favouring his maturation and offering him the possibility of unfolding his gifts of nature and grace. Every brother should be able to experience the *gratuitousness* of the welcoming community, not for what he can “do”, nor even for what he “is” but simply because he is a *brother*.

However, we must not forget, as Alberto Cortez's song says, “we are the others of the others”: that is, the brother is *also* community for each of its members. Hence, the brother is committed to building the community in which

¹⁶ *Messaggio del Santo Padre Benedetto XVI per la Quaresima 2013*. http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/es/messages/leni/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20121015_lenti-2013.html, consultato el 01-12-2017.

he lives, and he loves it even if it is imperfect: he knows that within it is the presence of Christ.

In all this the role of the superior is essential: besides his task at the community level, he also has a direct responsibility towards each confrere. He helps him realize his personal vocation and supports him in the work that has been entrusted to him. Simple words, but of great depth: what does it mean, for example, to help each brother *to realize his personal vocation*? Here again is the tension between person and community. There is a saying that the best can turn out to be the worst when corrupted (*corruptio optimi, pessima*). Our search for *personal realization*, one should never forget, has an objective configuration: “in Christ”. A person who does not feel “fulfilled in Christ” is hardly capable of carry out his mission and find any fulfilment in it.

«We must remember that desire *for self fulfilment* can come into conflict with the community’s projects. The search for *personal well-being*, whether spiritual or material, can render one’s total donation to the common mission difficult. Furthermore, *too subjective ways* of seeing the Charism and apostolic service can weaken collaboration and fraternal sharing»¹⁷.

How can the superior ensure the rightful respect for the freedom of the individual? It is certainly not an easy task, nor are there automatic formulas. Only love, which grows in *discernment* (see Phil 1: 9) can help us in this task, including, of course, the ‘grace of the state’.

By way of conclusion:

Living in communities, especially in international ones, requires an understanding of each person's personal stories and cultural differences in order to appreciate them, as well as knowing what is good and beautiful in the place and the context in which the community lives. It also implies helping us to recognize the limitations and the shortcomings of our own cultures in order to overcome them. In this way, with everyone's contribution, an intercultural experience is built, in which everyone is willing to give and receive and thus to overcome individualism.

We are speaking of a culture of coming together, the exchanging of gifts, the harmonizing of differences, all of which lead to visible expressions of unity in diversity. On this point a change of mentality is needed in the community, called to become a school, as Pope Francis writes:

“Learn to meet others with the right attitude, appreciating them and accepting them as fellow travellers, without inner resistance, [...] to discover Jesus in the faces of others, in their voices, in their requests. It is also learning to suffer in an embrace with the crucified Jesus when we suffer unjust aggression or ingratitude, *without ever getting tired of choosing fraternity*»¹⁸ (EG, 91).

¹⁷ CONGREGAZIONE PER GLI ISTITUTI DI VITA CONSACRATA E LE SOCIETÀ DI VITA APOSTOLICA, istruzione *Il servizio della autorità e la obediienza. Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram*, 3.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_20080511_auto_rita-obbedienza_sp.html, consultado el 01-12-2017.

¹⁸ FRANCISCO, esortazione apostolica *Evangelii gaudium*, 91. AAS 105 (2013) 1058 (1019-1137).

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, consultado 01-12-2017.

All this involves a wisdom, “that knows how to look at the sacred greatness of others, how to discover God in every human being, how to endure the harassment of living together by clinging to the love of God, and how to open one’s heart to divine love to seek the happiness of others like their good Father seeks theirs... *Let us not let the community be stolen!*”¹⁹ (EG, 92).

The firm certainty of being loved by God is at the centre of our vocation: to be signs and bearers of the Love of God, and of God who is Love; to be tangible signs of the presence of the Kingdom of God, a foretaste of the eternal joy of heaven. But only if our witness is joyful and radiant, will it be fruitful and attract the young to Christ. Moreover, joy is authentic if it springs from the heart, if it is born of God, if it is nourished by prayer, meditation on the Word of God, nourished by the celebration of the sacraments and community life. When these are lacking, weaknesses appear and difficulties arise which obscure the joy we once felt was burning within our heart at the beginning of our journey. Community life is a training ground for the heart. As Pope Francis says: «It is in community life that we are called to grow in mercy, in patience and in perfect charity»²⁰.

Fr Pascual Chávez V., sdb

¹⁹ *Idem.*

²⁰ Francisco, Incontro con le comunità religiose della Corea. 16 agosto 2014.
https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/speeches/2014/august/documents/papa-francesco_20140816_corea-comunita-religiose.html, consultato el 01-12-2017.