

CIRCULAR LETTER ON COMMUNITY LIFE

~ Some Thoughts and Reflections ~

DEAR BROTHERS,

Greetings to you in this graced time of Lent, especially as we are also celebrating with gratitude, attentiveness and hope the Year of Consecrated Life. May this time be fruitful in deepening our relationship with Jesus Crucified, rejoicing with our brothers in community, and in living solidarity with the ‘crucified’ people of today.

INTRODUCTION

In this letter I wish to cast some random thoughts on the subject of community life. This is also in response to the proposal from the last General Chapter which asked that the Superior General would undertake a specific pastoral action (catechesis) on the communitarian dimension of our life. I aim to share some reflections on community life from selected authors, but especially from Pope Francis – which I encourage you to use for your personal reflection, but also urge you to share as brothers in community.

There is never a time when the subject of community life is not an issue to talk about. We have done, and continue to do, a lot of talking, sharing and discussing about community life; there is also a vast amount of material written on this subject. I ask myself: *“What more can I say? Is there anything new that I can add?”* Perhaps a place to begin is the lived experience, because it is in the lived experience, more than anywhere else, where we can identify both the fruitful and evangelical community life, and also the challenges and sufferings encountered in community.

The fraternal community has enormous power to call people together. The illnesses of the community, on the other hand, have power that destroys.

~ Pope Francis

COMMUNITY LIFE: Thoughts & Reflections

I believe that much of the cry to hear more about this area of community life is in relation to the human-relational dimension, and not so much about the theological-spiritual dimension of which we can find lots of material, more especially some clear, beautiful and challenging thoughts expressed in our Rule and Constitutions.

From my own experience in living the common life, and from my visits to the communities and listening to the brothers’ experience of the fraternal life, I sense a yearning for companionship,

acceptance, respect, harmony and working together on the one hand; but I also see and hear about loneliness, isolation, individualism, independence and excessive privacy on the other.

Sometimes it is easier to hear the cries of poor people who are far away than it is to hear the cries of our brothers and sisters in our own community. There is nothing very splendid in responding to the cry of the person who is with us day after day and who gets on our nerves. Perhaps too we can only respond to the cries of others when we have recognized and accepted the cry of our own pain.

~ Jean Vanier, *Community And Growth*

In some instances, our communities are compared to ‘boarding houses’ – bodies living, praying, eating together, going out to work and returning to sleep. There is no communion! In fact some religious have re-defined “common life” in such a way that it may be understood to include religious who live alone for the sake of their ministry but come together regularly for mutual support. They claim to find more sincere communion with their brothers and sisters in this way. Is it a case of “*absence makes the heart grow fonder?*”

Pope Francis emphasises the ‘spirituality of communion’ as “a way of being” for religious and to be lived in community life:

Communion is lived first and foremost within the respective communities of each Institute. To this end, I would ask you to think about my frequent comments about criticism, gossip, envy, jealousy, hostility as ways of acting which have no place in our houses. This being the case, the path of charity open before us is almost infinite, since it entails mutual acceptance and concern, practicing a communion of goods both material and spiritual, fraternal correction and respect for those who are weak ... it is the “mystique of living together” which makes our life “a sacred pilgrimage”. We need to ask ourselves about the way we relate to persons from different cultures, as our communities become increasingly international. How can we enable each member to say freely what he or she thinks, to be accepted with his or her particular gifts, and to become fully co-responsible?

In an address at a symposium on Apostolic Religious Life, Sr Sara Butler of the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity said:

Common life is prescribed not simply for reasons of convenience and economy, nor even for mutual support in ministry, but because it manifests our communion in Christ. By our consecration, we share the same traditions, spirituality, apostolic purpose, resources, and constitutions. Our sisterly or brotherly communion announces that persons who love God are able to love and sustain each other, accept one another’s gifts and limitations, share joys and sorrows – despite differences in age, race, language, nationality, culture, temperament, and ministerial competence. Because the asceticism of community life demands love, forgiveness, patience, and mutual self-giving, it contributes to growth in holiness.

Vowed life, in fact, has serious consequences chiefly for those who live together. In an age of exaggerated individualism, community life is truly a prophetic sign. By living together, even at great cost, religious are able to bear striking witness to the Trinitarian mystery of self-emptying love.

We must not underestimate the witness value of our community life. Religious are asked to be witnesses of the humanising power of the Gospel through a life of brotherhood. Especially when divisions, breakdowns, conflicts, discrimination, prejudice, exclusion and individualism are such a reality of society and the world today, religious persons living in community together with those whom we did not choose, can be a witness to the values of unity, difference, harmony, acceptance, inclusion and cooperation for a common purpose. We bear witness to “*the Christian community founded on the love of Christ, who by His Cross, ‘tore down the wall of separation’ and made all one people.*” (Const. #26)

Pope Francis encourages us:

In these days when fragmentation justifies widespread sterile individualism and when the weakness of relationships breaks up and ruins the care of the human person, we are invited to humanize community relationships, to encourage communion of heart and spirit in the Gospel sense, because “there is a communion of life among all those who belong to Christ. It is a communion that is born of faith” that makes “the Church, in her most profound truth, communion with God, intimacy with God, a communion of love with Christ and with the Father in the Holy Spirit, which extends to brotherly communion”.

As it is our vocation and call “*to live the fullness of Christian love in an evangelical community*” (Const. #25), we reflect on the invitation of Pope Francis that this be characterised by ‘joy’ which is confirmed in the experience of community life:

Since we are witnesses of a communion beyond our vision and our limits, we are called to wear God’s smile. Community is the first and most believable gospel that we can preach. We are asked to humanise our community. “Build friendship between yourselves, family life, love among you. May the monastery not be a Purgatory but a family. There are and there will be problems but like in a family, with love, search for a solution with love; do not destroy this to resolve that; do not enter competitions. Build community life, because in the life of a community it is this way, like a family, and it is the very Holy Spirit who is in the middle of the community. [...] And community life always with a big heart. Let things go, do not brag, be patient with everything, smile from the heart. And a sign of this is joy”.

One of the sad facts of our community life is to find brothers who have lived, and continue to live with past hurts and unresolved conflicts experienced with their fellow brothers. Sometimes their life is rooted in bitterness and while they may celebrate the sacraments and preach reconciliation to others, yet they cannot bring themselves to forgive the brother they are living with in the community of the

house or the Province. This can have an overall negative and heavy atmosphere for everyone and does stifle joy and good communication. It also encourages people to make rash negative judgements and engage in unhelpful conversations filled with cynicism and sarcasm. Superiors, both Local and Major, must be attentive to this and confront particular situations with respect and charity.

Pope Francis says:

...you are challenged to become “experts” in divine mercy precisely through your life in community. From experience I know that community life is not always easy, but it is a providential training ground for the heart. It is unrealistic not to expect conflicts; misunderstandings will arise and they must be faced. Despite such difficulties, it is in community life that we are called to grow in mercy, forbearance and perfect charity.

He further urges:

Pray, pray for all the members of the community, but pray especially for those with whom I have problems or for those to whom I don’t wish well, because to not wish a person well sometimes is a natural thing, instinctive, but pray: and the Lord will do the rest.

Speaking of the community as a place of healing and growth, Jean Vanier writes:

The wound in all of us, and which we are all trying to flee, can become the place of meeting with God and with brothers and sisters; it can become the place of ecstasy and of the eternal wedding feast. The loneliness and feelings of inferiority which we are running away from become the place of liberation and salvation.

There is always warfare in our hearts; there is always a struggle between pride and humility, hatred and love, forgiveness and the refusal to forgive, truth and the concealment of truth, openness and closedness. Each one of us is walking in that passage towards liberation, growing on the journey towards wholeness and healing.

. . . We must not fear this vulnerable heart, with its closeness to sexuality and its capacity to hate and be jealous. We must not run from it into power and knowledge, seeking self-glory and independence. Instead, we must let God take his place there, purify it and enlighten it. As the stone is gradually removed from our inner tomb and the dirt is revealed, we discover that we are loved and forgiven; then under the power of love and of the Spirit, the tomb becomes a womb. A miracle seems to happen.

~ Jean Vanier, Community And Growth

Finally, we need to make greater efforts in community life to truly get-to-know one another. In order for this to happen, we must be prepared to give time to the other, to listen to their story with respect, and to hear their experiences in life which have been both life-giving and also those which have left scars that need continued healing through our fraternal care, acceptance, understanding and tenderness.

Brotherhood is a delicate thing...This is how we should treat brothers: with Eucharistic tenderness. We need to caress conflicts...Tenderness does us good. Eucharistic tenderness does not mask conflict but rather helps us to confront it like people.

~ Pope Francis

CONCLUSION

What I have shared in this letter is basically some random thoughts about community life, backed up by some helpful reflections from various authors to encourage, inspire and assist us in growing in brotherhood and giving joyful witness of Christian love in evangelical communities.

I am certainly no more an expert in community life than any one of you and I am very aware of the limitations of what is presented through this letter. However I am offering you these thoughts and reflections on particular aspects of community life, strongly urging every community through the responsibility of the Local Superior (with the encouragement of the Major Superior) to make time during this Lenten season to share about this area of our life, in relation to greater genuineness and growth of your particular community.

As we each reflect on our personal and communal desires to encounter Jesus in a deeper way this Lent, and as we respond genuinely to the grace of conversion gifted us by our merciful Father, let us walk this journey without fear, but with great trust and confidence strengthened by the compassion of our brothers and the tenderness of our God.



FR. JOACHIM REGO, C.P.
Superior General

SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Rome
Ash Wednesday
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Nowadays, consecrated life is faced with an opportunity and a very special task: that of creating, inspiring, enlivening and sustaining everywhere authentic fraternal communities that radiate friendship, incentive, support and reconciliation. Consecrated life must strengthen community life, to which new generations are very sensitive. It must accommodate the cultural and spiritual diversity of its members, knowing that living community is already mission. It ought to be open ad extra, towards all those excluded from history. We can ask ourselves: what is required of a community so that it can transmit to others the appeal of living together, united in diversity, creating heartfelt and humanizing spaces that are open and joyful for each person and for others? To achieve this, it must progress:

- from a life in common to a community of life rich in personal relationships, welcome, dialogue, discernment, responsible freedom, concern for the other and for what is diverse, where more than mere physical presence what is worth is the melding of spirit and the union of hearts;
 - from structures that make individuals childish to supports that can form people in freedom. It is not uncommon that, even with good will, certain structural supports have been multiplied making people childish, without creativity or imagination; they were agents more loyal to executing orders than people able to discern, from their own responsibility and their own loyal knowledge and understanding to live the mission assigned them. We do not help people to grow in maturity and responsibility by forcing them, but by encouraging them;
 - from an impossible uniformity to communion in diversity. Every Christian and religious community is a pale image of the Trinitarian community. And the Trinitarian community is realized in difference not in uniformity: each divine Person is different and works differently. The unity of the Holy Trinity is made up of the oppositions and differences of the three distinct Persons, co-sharers in love;
 - from a fortified trench to an open field where we battle for the Kingdom. An introverted community is a neurotic community. Our communities would live in a healthier and more airy manner if they opened up their doors and windows to the world; or if they came down to the streets and accompanied the caravans of men and women, listening with their hearts to how much people suffer, struggle and love. The place where we stand is not the convenient tail end without risks, but the line of fire where we fight for justice, solidarity and peace.
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~ The Great Challenges of Religious Life Today – by José M. Arnaiz, S.M.