

[slide 1] Living in Relationship: a view of religious community life

(Rome, the 13th October 2016)

Introduction: ‘Singles’ “in Relationship”

Over the years I learned that apparently sophisticated and brilliant titles may well have an unwanted connotation.¹ Thus searching for a suitable title for a reflection on community life of religious, I could have thought of [slide 2] “Living apart together”. After all, we are living *together* in one community, mostly together in one house, and we “have all things in common” (cf. Ac 4:32), and yet we live *apart*; we have our own private room, our own bedroom, as we do not live as partners. But on second thoughts I realized that “living apart together” would be rather confusing a title for a reflection on religious community life, since this expression is used for *partners*, who do *not* live in the same house and usually do *not* have all things in common.

So, just to be sure and avoid a funny title for this presentation, I googled my second idea: “living in relationship”. Then I found that these words are usually understood as synonymous with the so called [slide 3] *live-in relationship*, a term that indicates an arranged cohabitation of (usually) two people who are enduring partners, but who are not married. Indeed, when someone asks me: “Are you in a relationship?”, the clearest answer is probably “no”, so as to indicate that I live a celibate life. And yet the answer “yes” would in fact be more true. For, the word relationship refers first of all to nothing more than a situation of a long-lasting connection between the people concerned.

On Facebook you can indicate whether you are in a relationship or not *or* that [slide 4] “it is complicated”. For us, religious, it is true that we are in a relationship – with the other members of the community – but it is even more true/honest to say that it is complicated, since we are also, or rather: first of all, in a “vertical relationship” with God. And also our “horizontal relationship” is far from simple, since today people either have a partner or they don’t. It is, however, better not to indicate “it is complicated”, because this characterisation could mean all sorts of things and is therefore confusing.

So, we are religious and thus we are in a relationship, in relationships: with God and with one another. We, Passionists, are engaged [slide 5] in a special way with Christ Crucified, Who has drawn us to Himself in such a way that we live through Him, with Him and in Him. This is the basis for our living together in a religious community.

¹ Initially the title that I had chosen for my dissertation was “The Crucial almightiness of God”. But because of the sexual connotation of the word crucial in American English, I eventually chose: “God, Passion and Power, - Thomas Aquinas on the Passion of Christ and the Almightiness of God.”

[slide 6] Thus we are single in the sense that we do not have a partner. However, we are neither alone, as other singles are: we are living in a community and the very heart of it is our relationship with God (in the Holy Spirit, through Christ). Nor are we searching for a partner of some kind, as other singles could do; we are living in an alternative relationship (in the proper sense of the word) or we are living an alternative to a relationship (in the ordinary sense of the word).

We share with married couples that our relationship is (meant to be) a life-long relationship. [slide 7] Distinct is, however, that we live in this relationship not because **we have chosen** one another, but because we sense that **we are chosen**; we are *called* to live together as religious in community, in *this* community. We have responded. So, our relationship in the community is not *based* on mutual love, as in the case of partners – I love you and you love me, so let's live together. Still mutual love is the very *heart* of the relationship in which we live: namely fraternal love beyond personal preferences and dislikes. Thus the relationship-without-a-partner, the relationship of religious life is meant to be *at least* as together, life-fulfilling and strong and lasting and happy as marriage is meant to be.

[slide 8] **We are strangers**

The Rule of 1775 sets out by stating that our congregation has the same object as every Christian and Ecclesiastic ought to have: to follow Christ in every way. However, the focus above on the language that we use for speaking about the way we live together, already shows that our life, our way of living this is quite different: we use some words in an analogous way, with another meaning or connotation than in civil life. In brief, religious life has its own vocabulary. This strangeness in language reflects that our very way of life is strange.

Well, this strangeness of ours is not something new; from the beginning Jesus' disciples are designated as *in the world, but not of this world* (Jn 17:15f cf. 18:36). But in most parts of the world we become increasingly strange. Some examples:

- where the presence of the Church and the numbers of religious are declining, people are less acquainted with us than they were before;
- all over the world the way of perceiving the reality is influenced so much more by opinions and fantasies (e.g. Dan Brown) than by (religious) wisdom and insights, more by experiences than by reflection on experiences;
- mass media and films open up a totally new, virtual world in which religious are often caricaturized or even invisible and thus hard to find;
- in general we find people becoming increasingly free to choose and individualistic (also due to smartphones computers and internet) and also self-centred (decreasing solidarity and acceptance of each others' imperfections).

[slide 9] We find these developments reflected in our candidates:

1. in most areas in the world there are fewer candidates and more candidates/temporary professed leave;
2. My experience is that many come with preconceived ideas and high ideals that do not match the reality;
3. Moreover, *not* every suitable candidate for the priesthood is also a suitable candidate for religious life. For the sake of keeping up the numbers in our provinces we may well consider to accept “priests”, but are they also going to enrich our communities and invest in it? Are they going to *embrace* Passionist spirituality (rather than just put up with it) *and* are they going to embrace their Brethren?

[slide 10] But no less the same reflections of these and similar developments mentioned above concern ourselves and our professed Brethren; we too come from- and live in “this crazy world” and thus we are influenced by it no less!

In the light of such questions around our identity as religious in community and the ways in which we are related to one another, all vowed members – and foremost the superiors and formators – need to have a clear view of their own religious life and of Passionist religious life: only then can we give the good example and foster the vocations in our Congregation.

Searching for a model

For ourselves, our self-understanding, it has always been helpful to use a model that clarifies how we are related. What’s clear: we are a community of men, gathered around Christ Crucified. But do we find a metaphor/image or an analogy of how we are related to one another?

It has been brought to the fore that Paul of the Cross ordered us to live as the apostles. We can read it in his last Rule, for instance. Well, by doing so Paul did nothing new: of old the life of the Apostles *after* the gift of the holy Spirit (!) as it is described in Ac 2,42-47 and 4,32-35 has been of great influence on religious life: communal life, having everything in common, prayer together, daily breaking of the bread, giving witness of their faith. But at the same time we know very well that these descriptions in the Acts are more ideal than real: the letters of the Apostle Paul, for instance, which are older, show us the real problems in the community of faith. And: apparently the apostles did not live together (cf. Ga 1).

There is nothing wrong with high ideals. However, if we do not take into account our own weaknesses, brokenness, failures, we are not going to be a happy and inspiring community.

In this presentation I would like to examine (briefly) with you three models that are traditionally used and then I will share with you yet another model, that may be helpful for understanding our living together as religious.

[slide 11] **1. The Family Model**

In religious orders and congregations we find the family model of religious life explicitly (i.e. formulated in texts) from the late Middle Ages on. “Family” is a relatively clear concept.

[slide 12] We speak of *original family* as the family in which we were born and/or brought up. Our *actual family* is the family we choose: with a partner of our choice.² In this constellation religious life, the congregation to which we belong (belonging!), is the family we choose.

We are not married and yet our Congregation has become our actual family, with all the consequences that come with it. A man shall leave his parents and be joined to his wife [Mk 10:7]. We leave our parents to join the Community. We see this in the call of the first disciples: The sons of Zebedee who were working with their father, left their father behind and joined the group of Jesus’ disciples [Mk 1:20]. The disciple who replies “Lord, let me first bury my father,” is told: “Follow Me and let the dead bury the dead”... [Mt 8:21f]; let no one and nothing come between you and Me.

My parents live quite close to the monastery: only 6 kilometres away. But they understand and accept that I do not visit them on Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. I do not visit them and I *cannot* even visit them: not in the first place because I have to work, but primarily because I want to be (and need to be) with “my family”, my actual family, that is my community: the Congregation that is actual as my family in the concrete local community. Therefore, I visit my parents the day after, which is in the Netherlands called the 2nd Christmas/ Easter/ Pentecost Day. In the beginning this was a rather scant consolation, but over the years they have not only respected but even totally accepted this choice of mine.

Speaking of family, in some sister congregations we find a strong bridle mysticism. Entering the order is like marrying Christ as the groom. But, although this image is used for the Church as a whole (the Church as the bride of Christ), this image does not really work for most male religious; it feels too contrived, even though “God” is not “a man”. On the other hand, there are some congregations of men with a strong emphasis on the bond between the Blessed Virgin Mary and the disciple whom Jesus loved, but that is not necessarily the family model for all male religious.

We believe that the Lord is calling us to form a religious community. At the same time, from a sociological point of view religious life is and always has been an alternative form of

² The terms *original family* and *actual family* are invented by me in order to distinguish between our natural family and religious family. The advantage of the new terminology is that it shows better how they are related: on the one hand these terms show the chronology (the original one comes first in time) and on the other hand the hierarchy (the actual one has priority in the here and now). This is not the case or at least not as clear with the terms natural and religious; *my family* is my *actual family* and since I entered a religious order (congregation), this actual family of mine is the religious community to which I belong.

cohabitation. By the religious themselves the imagery of family is used, so as to order the community. It is reflected in the terms Brother, Sister, Father, Mother.

A family consists usually, or rather ideally, of a father and a mother and children who are brothers and sisters. We, religious, use these terms father/brother and mother/sister so automatically, that in this context we may not connect these terms with the idea of family at all. We are so used to the terminology, that we (let alone the people who are not religious) do not hear the connotation of family resonate in words like father, brother, sister.

The family model for religious life, however, has been and is under fire. The main reason is that in this family model most of the members of the community function as children i.e. without *real* responsibility or only with responsibility for the things that they are told to do, under the flag of the vow of obedience. In other words, the (major) decisions are taken by others, namely the (major) superior as the *pater familias*, who has the full authority.

To most of us the family structures are familiar: most of us were brought up in a family, be it ideal and harmonious or broken or dysfunctional. But in many ways our original family does not quite match with our actual, religious family, for instance:

-we are all adults, at least in terms of age; when we enter we are not children any more.

Adults must not be treated as children; it leads to infantilism and even psychological disorders.

I remember an older priest in one of our communities – may God have his soul! He had a very responsible job as chaplain in a prison (a tough job!) and he was highly respected by the civil authorities and praised by the prisoners. He was even decorated by the queen for this. And yet in the community I have experienced him as a child: not taking any responsibility in the house, totally oblivious to the lock, stock and barrel of community life. His attitude was: “the (local) superior will take care of it.”

-also in our intellectual development we are adults: through our (academic) education, the news on television, information through the internet. We are not ignorant and unknowing as people who live totally remote from what is happening in the wide world.

-spiritually we are adults too, at least I hope so. Our experiences have formed our faith, our way of believing. Just like Job we have lost our childlike innocence; we seek a new, adult way of surrender and devotion.

When we enter the community, we have learned things and we bring these in with us when we enter: skills, attitudes, habits etc.. When people enter nowadays they know much more about life than when people joined 50 years ago. The demand of absolute obedience is replaced by the demand for responsible listening. Members (to be) must be able to take responsibility for their own life and feel responsible for their Brethren in the community.

The consequence of this is that the family model as we knew it, does not work anymore. We cannot just stick with the rules and leave everything else to the superior. Yes, it is true: God can speak to us through our superior! But to equal the two bluntly borders blasphemy. And yet, it is only a few years ago that I heard the argument used: “The voice of the superior is the voice of God”! It was not in my own province, but it was within our Congregation...

Because of the radical changes in the world and the changes within the Church, a reorientation of religious community life was (Vatican II) and remains absolutely necessary. In North Europe and the United States many religious in formation and professed members have left in the 1950s (so, already before Vaticanum II) unto the '70s, also many missionaries. We see it in more recent years in other parts of the world as well. Religious do not just leave in order to get married, but more fundamentally because the way they lived in the community was too much at odds with work and life outside the monastery walls: it has to do with the (traditional family) structure as well as with the affectionate part of our communal life.

So, in the course of time either religious communities changed and became more and more communities of adults, or members left, especially where the traditional family structure was upheld and where the changes were found too slow or not going far enough.

I would like to review briefly two alternatives that have been developed since then: images that may help us to *understand* our living together better and thus help us to *live* together better: in a more loving, joyful and attentive way:

[\[slide 13\]](#) **2. A Community of disciples**

When we as Church people look for something new, we usually begin by looking back: whence did we come? Which are our roots? We see then that Jesus called and gathered men (and women) to be His disciples:

Jesus turned and saw them *following him* and said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “*Come, and you will see.*” So they went and saw where he was staying, and *they stayed with him* that day. (Jn 1:38f)

When he saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his *disciples* came to him. *He began to teach them.* (Mt 5:1f: the Sermon on the Mount)

Come to me, all you who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for your selves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light. (Mt 11:28-30)

In this model we see Christ in the centre and people gathering round Him. All are focused on Him. Christ is so to speak the Magister/teacher and all are disciples learning from Him.

The advantage of this model over the traditional family model is that all – including the superiors – are disciples, adults or people on the way towards a responsible life.

However, the problem in this model is that it is not clear how the disciples are interrelated. They are all related to Christ, but how are they as a community? In the gospels we do not read much about the way in which the disciples lived together before the Crucifixion. Oh yes:

“Then an argument broke out among [the disciples] about which of them should be regarded as the greatest. [Jesus] said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them and those in authority over them are addressed as *benefactors*; but among you it shall not be so. Rather, let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant.’” (Lk 22:24-26).

In other words: *especially* the leaders, the superiors, are representing Christ Who serves the least of His brothers and sisters.

And after the gift of the Holy Spirit? In the beginning we find this ideal situation, which seems like the description of religious life: all are attentive, coming together every day to pray and break the bread and have all goods in common. Acts 2 and 4 have undeniably influenced our religious life. But we also see how after the gift of the Holy Spirit “the 12”, the first disciples, do *not* live together anymore.

Furthermore, we see how tensions arise between Peter and Paul (Gal 1).

[slide 14] The American Sister Sandra Schneiders *ihm*, who contributed much to the development of our thinking of religious life after Vatican II, suggests that religious are “co-disciples in ministry” (Fiand, 80). But what does this mean? Is it our ministry then, our mission that binds us together?

It is beautiful, indeed a good thing, when a community has a common goal, a common focus or project also outside the community itself. But if it is all about our (common) ministry, before we know it, we may well lose ourselves in our work. After a while we may only communicate with one another and share with one another insofar as it is relevant for our project.

Thus it becomes clear that the idea of religious as “a community of disciples” is better than the traditional family model, because the community members are considered responsible

adults, who *all* are to learn from Christ. But this model is not enough as a directive for living religious community life in an authentic way. For, it does not explain well enough how we are interrelated.

[slide 15] **3. A Community of Friends.**

A second alternative to the traditional family model is the religious community as a community of friends. Much has been written about this one, already in the Middle Ages: by abbots and mystics. The most famous one is Aelred of Rievaulx (*Speculum caritatis* 1143, *De spirituali amicitia*, ca. 1145-50). In the 20th century this idea of a religious community as a group of friends is developed further in reaction to a rigid and infantile way of forming a community.

Just like the image of the community of disciples also the community of friends is derived from the Gospel: Jesus at the Last Supper says to His disciples:

[slide 16] “I no longer call you slaves/servants, because a slave/servant does not know what his master is doing. I have called you *friends*, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.” (Jn 15:15)

There is much to say in favour of this idea. If our Brethren are also loving and caring friends, this is truly a blessing. On the other hand, if we do not get along at all, our house, our community may be more like hell than a foretaste of the Kingdom of heaven.

Yes, we are called to share the gifts of the Holy Spirit as wisdom and friendliness, joy and attention for one another and thus make these gifts fruitful: we are to build up a friendly community. But in the end also this alternative is not very helpful, I am afraid.

The words friend and friendship are used a lot in the Church. When I worked as a student chaplain in Rotterdam, I was invited regularly to a Bible study group of international students called “Friends”. This name of this group mesmerized me from the very beginning. In some cultures every acquaintance is called “friend”, whereas in the Netherlands, where I come from you do not call someone “friend” easily. As I took part in this student Bible study group it soon dawned on me: the name “Friends” is a way of selling the goods under false pretences. Indeed, whenever I was there, I saw people who were friendly with one another, but not really friends. They shared an interest and so there was a bond. They communicated on that level of shared interests, but disagreement caused a tension, immediately. To me it felt like a forced harmony; we *need* to be friends, because that is what the name of the group is. At times they shared something more personal. But outside these meetings there was not much

contact amongst them. I found that a real personal connection was lacking. And that is logical, because *real* friends love each other and therefore become friends, even though they may be very different: as for their faith, social background or sexual orientation. Friendship is not on the basis of a shared interest or agreement, work or vocation; friendship is first of all a *personal* thing - a click, an attraction - and subsequently it can be strengthened through shared interests.

In this context I think of an academic sermon of Thomas Aquinas, where he says:

[slide 17] “No one ought to have a friend in truth;” we ought to cling only to the truth, because, as the Philosopher says, disagreement in opinions is not incompatible with friendship.” (Sermon 08 part 3, p.101)

In other words: in the case of a disagreement we should neither leave the truth (and especially not the truth of our faith) nor should we leave our friends (for, friendship is mutual love and love as a gift of the Holy Spirit remains).

In the same way a religious community consists of friends of Jesus. But these friends of Jesus are not *necessarily* also friends of one another. Of course, it is a true blessing when we have friends in the community, Brethren who are truly with us: whom we can trust and who listen and are honest, really caring etc. Indeed, a (minimal) requirement for community life is mutual respect: there needs to be a basic willingness to live together with the community members who may not be the housemates of our own choice. But *liking* each other, as friends, is not and *cannot* be a condition for joining a religious community. Exactly this – this mutual liking of one another on a personal level – distinguishes partner relations from religious life!

[slide 18] So, even a construed description of religious life as “a community of friends who are co-disciples in ministry” may seem an interesting alternative to the traditional family concept. But quickly it falls short in more than one respect: [slide 19] religious community life would become too exclusive (friends: based on like – dislike), too self-centred (disciples: I need to have a good relationship with Christ, so I am not going to invest too much in my Brethren) and too much aimed at ministry and other work (ministry: escapism).

[slide 20] 4. The Family Model 2.0

Why a family model? As I already said, our language tells us more than we may realize. Jesus teaches us to address God as our Father as we pray. [slide 21] We pray the Our Father several times a day together. The word “Father” evokes images of family, obviously; “father” presupposes children, a family. Furthermore, the *practice* of this prayer, saying this prayer *together*, “OUR Father”, expresses this kinship and makes us realize that we are all each other’s brothers (and sisters).

In the Church we are brothers and sisters of a special kind: not because of blood ties, but because we have one and the same Father, from Whom we all have come forth. In Christ, His Son, our Brother, through faith and through baptism, He unites us to Himself and we acknowledge this.

The old English word brethren means brothers. It is especially used in religious life. The difference with our other brothers (and sisters) in the Church is the intensity (Rule n.1): by taking four vows we express that we want to live with God more intimately (Constitutions 96).

By taking vows we enter into this closer relationship: sonship and brotherhood are main focuses for us, as we enter the Passionist *family* - interesting, that we use this term in our Congregation - as consecrated members!

Even more, this mode of belonging is even expressed in our name: “C.P.” is added to our name. It may look like a title or an addition, but it is much more than this; it is an integral part of our name. “C.P.” emphasizes that we belong to the same family; in fact we have the same sir name.

But, what then is *new* in the Family Model 2.0 for religious life in the 21st century? Let me briefly point out three aspects: a. the *analogy* of the brotherhood; b. acknowledging the *reality* of who we are; c. a *metaphor* from Scripture.

a. The analogy of the brotherhood

In the light of what was said above, it is not far-fetched to call one another brother and to treat one another as such: as beloved members of the same actual family; as brothers who are dear to each other, who belong together in what is meant to be a life long and an unbreakable bond. It reminds me of Psalm 133 where this is expressed:

[slide 22] [text Psalm 133] A song of ascents. Of David.

How good and how pleasant it is,
when brothers dwell together as one!
Like fine oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
Upon the beard of Aaron,
upon the collar of his robe.
Like dew of Hermon coming down
upon the mountains of Zion.
There the LORD has decreed a blessing,
life for evermore!

This analogy of brotherhood is as such nothing new: especially in Africa and among Afro-Americans Christians in general call one another brother and sister.

However, in religious life and also in *our* congregation this is not the common practice.³ In the context of the liturgy we may be addressed as “dear brothers” or “brothers (and sisters) in Christ”. But outside this context, in ordinary life, it is the case that, if we do not call each other by name – which would be my preference, also in the light of how we see one another – we usually address the priests as “father”, even though Christ tells us explicitly not to do so [Mt 23:9].

In some places the brothers are called the mothers of the province/congregation. It is endearing (and that is how it is meant, I am sure, just as father “Father superior” and “Father Bishop”), but mystifying at the same time: the motherly love and care are required of the ordained members as well. Principally and in the end we are all brothers [Mt 23:8].

The model in which we are all brothers brings to the fore how we are gathered by the Holy Spirit and thus are related to the Father and to Christ and to each other. We choose some of our Brethren in responsible positions (“superiors”), but only for a while and for the purpose of good order [Mt 23:11f. Lk 22:25-27 cf. 1Pe 5:3].

[slide 23] **b. The reality of who we are**

The Family Model 2.0 for religious life acknowledges that we are all adults, or at least supposed to be adults. In community life we – superiors, priests, brothers, clerics, men in the different stages of formation – are to treat one another as adults. For an adult religious family life it is not enough to just strictly observe the rules: adults take responsibility for their own (religious) life, are accountable. Adults take initiatives: to love, to respond, to propose, to question, to choose. Adults in religious life are willing to cooperate, to help one another, listen, confer, apologize, forgive – as brothers.

c. A Scripture image

Is there a Scripture passage that helps us to understand ourselves better as contemporary religious in the family model 2.0? There are quite a few options in Scripture, but it seems that the parable of the Prodigal Son (or: the Merciful Father) is most helpful. There is much to say about this, as my Brethren from Kenya remember who attended the retreats that I directed, but let me just give a few examples:

[slide 24] Luke 15:11-32 (the prodigal son / the merciful father) gives us an insight into a family: one father and two sons: one older, one younger. For the father the brothers are equal:

³ Here I do not wish to address how we are called by the people whom we serve; the issue at stake is religious life.

he loves them both with all his heart and he expresses this, although the sons do not always seem to experience this love.

The attitudes and behaviour of the sons are quite different. But we may recognize their characteristics in ourselves and in one another. It is a model, so what follows is not meant as precise descriptions of one or another singular person.

[slide 25] The youngest son:

- “Father, give me my share”: *I take what is mine* (and I do not care about the rest)
- “He set out to a far distant country”: *Leaving our spiritual home*
- Spending time/money, self-centred: *I want more joy/fun.*
- Life becomes survival: loneliness*
- Freedom soon turns into being enslaved*
- the point of return (believing in his father, acknowledging your own failure; his mercy is greater)*

[slide 26] The oldest son:

- seems perfectly obedient, chaste and poor, but: *he feels burdened; high expectations (of himself + he presumes the father has high expectations)*
- he feels unappreciated* (no joy!)
- has become judgemental, angry, bitter, jealous: in fact *he is also lost, depressed*
- he is merciless (also for himself): he thinks the love of the father must be earned*
- the point of return (responding to the father)*

Now, this is not to map out how dysfunctional religious life is (or can be), but this parable makes us understand better [slide 27] 1. how we are related as brothers of the one *ever loving* Father⁴: the traps, our shady sides and the way to redemption: through faith, conversion, asking for forgiveness and mercy and finding happiness in our interrelatedness and in the opposite attitudes.

2. that we, as adult brothers of one another, are called to grow into the image of our ever loving Father. Our Brother Jesus Christ shows us how: in His living and His Passion/dying (cf. the way to the Father: Jn 14,6 etc.)

Thank you for your attention.

- What do you think of the distinction original family – actual family?
- Contemplate the Psalm
- What do you think of the Family Model 2.0? And the image from Lk 15?

⁴ This is not Paul of the Cross; he is also a child of his time, one of our brothers, an outstanding one!

-Find a Biblical figure who lives in a household/family with whom you could identify (to a certain extent, of course) or who appeals to you as a religious-in-community.

e.g.

-Isaac, Jacob and Esau

-Jacob, Joseph and his brethren

-Saul, Jonathan and David

-Job, his wife and children and his visiting friends

-John the Baptist and his disciples

-the holy Family

-Jesus' disciples e.g. the storm on the lake (Mt 14:22-33 or Lk 8:22-25) or the transfiguration (Mt 17:1-13)

-the workers of the 11th hour and the one who hired them: many first shall be last and last first (Mt 20,1-16)

-the servants who receive 5, 2 and 1 talent when their master sets off to a far distant land (Mt 25:14-30 or Lk 19:11-27))

-the anointing of Jesus just before the Last Supper at Bethany (Mt 26:6-16)

-the Last Supper (Lk 22:1-38, Jn 13:1-13)

-the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32)

-Zachaeus (Lk 19,1-10)

-guests who refused to come to the feast (Mt 22:1-14 or Lk 14,15-24)

-five loaves and two fishes (Lk 9:10-17)

-the sending of the Twelve two by two (Lk 10:1-20)

-*Mary and Martha (and Lazarus)*

Religious in community are a strange species. Although we find different kinds of communes, outside the Church we do not find a widespread parallel of religious community life. Hence, maybe more than ever, we need to explain ourselves all the time:

-to the civil authorities: How is it that 100% of our income is for a charity? Indeed, thus you do not have to pay taxes, but how do you live then? Some years ago each member of my community received financial support of the municipality, because it was registered that we were the poorest in town. So we had to explain our situation; yes, we are living a simple life, but we do so by choice.

-to the bank: Since this year in our country everyone *must* have a personal bank account. So, I went with the men who did not have one yet – including myself – to the bank in order to open a bank account. One of the questions on the form was: fill out the number of your former bank account. Obviously we could not answer this question, because none of us had had one. Thus the system blocked and the assisting lady panicked; we did not fit into the system.

-to ordinary people: Why do you live together but not as partners, even without a partner or any kind of relationship? And even more, are you really *free* if you have to live according to a rule and if someone else has the power to tell you what to do?

If we consider community life in order to understand ourselves better – what we are, how we are related and what we are doing and why – one of the first things we should realize is that our way of communal life is increasingly countercultural, esp. in view of a growing individualism, in fact all over the world. This consideration is not for fencing ourselves off from society and pushing it away. We must realize that our candidates come from a culture where the values that are self-evident to *us*, may well be arcane to them, even though they are Catholics and feel attracted to our community. Moreover, we ourselves, professed for years/decades, are part of this culture as well; we – our thoughts, visions, aspirations, attitude etc. – have changed with the changes in our cultures as we engage in our ever changing societies.

Yet again, we are strange: we are neither married nor do we just live by ourselves; we live according to rules that we did not make ourselves, but which we inherited. This is strange, because we live in a world in which absolute freedom is regarded and promoted as the highest good (vs. obedience), where riches are seen as a guarantee for a happy life, free of worries (vs. poverty) and where love cannot be imagined without power or sexual expression (vs. chastity). No, religious and their way of life are not quite self-evident.

Furthermore, for us, the Passionist community formed around the Cross of Christ, our charism is at odds, it seems, with so much suffering in our world that is devastating communities. Many rather just run away from it (to survive) or ignore it (to just continue with their life).

In this reflection I do not want to go further into this. But I would like to point out here that, when we think, speak and share on our community life, we do this in the context in which we live.