
PASSIONIST COMMUNITY LIFE

The 47th General Chapter identified “*community life*” as one of the major issues demanding greater attention from all Passionists in the next six years. Community life is a beautiful ideal that attracts us but is often a daily reality that wounds us.

The Example of Jesus

The first thing to say is that the ideal of community life includes some of the core aspirations of all Christians to live in love and harmony with fellow Christians. This is the ideal presented by Jesus to his disciples at the last supper as recorded in John’s Gospel, “*love one another as I have loved you*” (John 15, 12), and then in his great prayer to the Father, “*may they be one as we are one*” (Jn. 17, 21).

The disciples form a community of followers who take their lead from Jesus and pledge to live according to his example and teaching. Love and forgiveness, as well as service of the poor and the suffering are the heart of this community life. It is the life of mutual love and service that is the most powerful witness to Jesus and that attracts new members to the Church, “*by your love all people will know that you are my disciples*” (John 13, 35).

At the same time, we know from the letters of St. Paul that the early Christian communities were far from perfect. From the start, they experienced lots of tensions and troubles, with members in conflict and disagreement and causing scandal to others inside and outside the community. Life in the Church was a combination of beautiful ideals and messy reality.

The Ideal of Community is Attractive

Young people are particularly attracted to the ideal of religious community life. This is the view of Archbishop Carballo O.F.M., Secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life. Speaking at the gathering of young religious during the Year of Consecrated Life (2015), he said that young people today, and young religious in particular, are searching for an experience of real fraternity in community life. Archbishop Carballo is not alone in thinking this. His view is confirmed by many commentators on modern youth.

Community life responds to a deep human need for belonging and fellowship. This may be because young people today find little depth and consolation in their friendships and other relationships. Sometimes even family life lacks real warmth and young people do not feel understood or accepted by their parents. It is natural, therefore, that the ideal of religious community life, and its emphasis on brotherhood, sharing, mutual love and acceptance would appeal to a deep need in young people for this kind of “*being-together-with-others*”.

On the other hand, those who are living the religious life tell us that their experience of community is often painful even negative. In other words, they do not always experience community life as helpful. In the religious community there can be a real lack of true friendship; communication between the members is often very poor or even totally lacking. There are few moments of real interpersonal sharing and the support of the brethren is not always forthcoming.

Unfortunately, the community life of religious may be little more than a group of people living under the same roof. Praying together is a rushed recitation of the divine office. Eating together is also done in a hurry and merely functional. Collaboration on mission offers more opportunities for better sharing but here too it is often just individuals doing their own separate task alongside others.

There is, therefore, a great tension between the beautiful ideal of brothers living in community that is so attractive to the youth of today and the reality of community as experienced by those who live it. Can we address this tension in a creative and helpful way?

The Ideal and the Real

Let us take a closer look at the ideal of community life. We all naturally think in terms of ideals. For example, we might ask, “*what is the Church?*” and then proceed to give the answer found in the Catechism, which is a definition or description of the “*ideal church*” according to the authoritative teaching of the magisterium and the “*mind of God*”. We do not usually answer the question about the Church by describing the day-to-day events and occurrences of real life in the local Church.

Ideals are beautiful but we must also handle them with care. The Greek philosopher Plato has had an enormous influence on Church thinking and in

shaping our expectations. We are both helped and haunted by ideals. They give us hopes and aspirations but also fill us with guilt and even despair because we fail to reach the ideal in daily life. Living with ideals alone leads to discouragement and disillusionment with oneself and more often with others. Ideals encourage high expectations that are often unrealistic and easily frustrated. Unfortunately, this can lead to disappointment and even disillusionment when we are confronted with reality that is less than ideal. We aspire to the ideal of community and we expect to encounter it within the ideal Church. The reality is usually very different.

The theology of the Church influences our view of community life. When the Church is conceived of as an institution with structures and systems, containing all the means of salvation, with authority and magisterium, it appears as something already perfect, with everything it needs for its life and mission. This very static view of the perfect Church has a Platonic flavor since it presents the Church as something fully formed and unchanging in its universal essence. This is not the Church of suffering sinners who are struggling every day to hear the Word and put it into practice.

These reflections on the Church in general apply also to the ideal of community life. Religious community is often thought of in the same static fashion. In this sense, the ideal Passionist community is presented to us as something already existing and it is described in Chapter 2 of the Constitutions.

We will not be surprised to discover that the real community is something different. The attractive ideal touches our hearts and imaginations and gives us the energy to move towards it. But we need more than an unreachable ideal to live the concrete reality of daily life in community. In order to live well in community, each person needs to develop the maturity to accept the often difficult challenges of real community life. The first challenge is to accept the truth of one's own limitations and weaknesses.

A New Kind of Community Life

What, then, is the future of community life? I believe a new kind of community life will be shaped according to a more realistic understanding of human nature and human relationships. We need a new Christian anthropology that affirms the unique dignity of each person made in the image and like-

ness of God and striving every day with the help of God to live according to that dignity.

Community life today, like all human relationships, is based on the free choice of the members. The religious Community is like a small local church. It has its own nature and end. However, today it is impossible to define the proper end of community apart from the good of the members.

In the past, it was easy to ask the members to submerge their individual identities in the community and to make the ends or goals of the community their own. This usually meant substituting the ends or goals of the community for one's own personal goals, according to the ideal, "*I no longer have personal goals but only the goals of the community.*" This kind of community life is no longer possible or even desirable.

The community does not demand the elimination of the individual but rather welcomes, affirms and promotes the good of the individual with all his talents and potential. The community is the place where the person flourishes and realizes his true self. This view of community life parallels the teaching on marriage where the relationship between the spouses, their mutual love and mutual enrichment is now seen as one of the essential ends of marriage.

A Strong Sense of identity

What is needed for the community to enhance the life of the members?

First of all, the healthy community will have a strong sense of identity and mission that the members are attracted to and embrace as their own. From this they gain an increased sense of personal wellbeing. The charismatic vision and missionary ideals of the Congregation attract the members and form the first basis of their life together. Each member experiences something like the joy of the apostles who were called to be with Jesus and sent out by him (Mark 3, 14).

Respect for Persons

The second characteristic of a life-enhancing community is the recognition and affirmation of the unique dignity and talents of each person.

Today's community life is built on the pillars of flourishing persons. The community will flourish as the members flourish. Time and creativity given to enhancing the life and ministry, the participation and appreciation of all the

members is the only way the community grows and radiates the life and energy of Christ.

The community accepts that it is its responsibility to cultivate and nourish the personal growth and development of each member. It does this by welcoming the contribution of each member and fostering a climate of participation and mutual encouragement.

Good Communication

A third characteristic of a healthy community is good communication at every level. Communication is the life-blood of the community. It is the essential means of enabling the fullest participation of all the members in the life of the community. There are different kinds of communication including the communication between leaders and members, communication in the decision-making processes, and interpersonal communication between the members.

Creating an environment of good communication requires skills and dedication. It does not happen automatically. It is not the result of a charismatic leader but of good structures and good practices. These structures and practices are primarily concerned with providing the times and the best means for the exchange of information and ideas, as well as opportunities to deepen mutual understanding and acceptance among the members. Organizing the times and the most effective means of communication is essential to the flourishing of community life today.

Recreation in common is not as strong an ingredient of religious community life today. This is largely due to the use of the internet and other media. Most religious have a personal computer and can access news and other forms of recreation online. Recreation in common now needs to be organized on an occasional basis. One evening a week or on special feast days, the brethren are invited to come together for refreshments or to enjoy a movie together or some other form of recreation in common.

A Community that Prays

Another essential ingredient of a healthy religious community is a healthy prayer life. In most communities, prayer in common takes the form of reciting or singing the divine office. This is a strong structure that includes nourishing prayers in the psalms and a long and venerable tradition. It also means that

community prayer does not have to be invented anew every day. On the other hand, it is a form of prayer that can be so routine and formal that it becomes lifeless and empty. Prayer in the community is for the glory of God and the enhancement of the members. It cannot be allowed to become so routine and formal that it is no longer experienced as nourishing.

The members of the community can discuss and agree other forms of praying together. Suitable places and environments for personal meditation and prayer will also help the members.

More than an Institution

Community does not simply happen when people live under the same roof, dine in the same refectory, pray in the same chapel.

The ideal of religious community presented here differs from an earlier model that was centered on rules and regulations, was more formal and less personal. That model called for greater conformity of the members and a greater emphasis on submission to legitimate authority. These values remain but within the new person-centered context. The movement towards a view of community life that encourages the full participation and contribution of free, responsible, adult religious reflects a wider movement in society. In society today, there is a widespread suspicion of institutions of every kind, including religious institutions. They are seen as remote, impersonal, uncaring, and self-serving. Institutional life is now seen as depersonalizing and even dehumanizing. Institutions can no longer be looked to as unambiguous signs of the Kingdom of God. The many stories of corruption, financial irregularities, sexual misbehavior, political intrigue etc. make it impossible to have a naïve belief in the intrinsic value of the institution.

That institutional model of community life is no longer effective. Community is an organic, living reality that needs to be watered and nourished with attention and care. Today the priority of the Church is for persons and not institutions. Institutions are always a means for the good of persons. Persons are not subordinate to institutions.

The community is not a free-standing institution, with an independent existence that individuals step into or out of. The community in a sense is created by the active participation and communication of the members. It is they who appropriate the ideals and aims of the congregation in this particular place.

An Image from the Scriptures

We can find a great deal of encouragement in the dramatic biblical story of the Exodus. It is a powerful image or metaphor for the Christian experience of salvation and the life of the Christian community.

Like the enslaved people of Israel, we were all enslaved by sin and Jesus the savior set us free. He now leads us on the path towards the new Promised Land, the Kingdom of God. It is in the Church, together with the whole people of God, that we make our pilgrim way towards the fullness of life in the Kingdom.

The journey of the people through the desert is an image of the life of the Church in the world and throughout history. We are the chosen people, we have been set free, we are on our way, God is with us to guide and protect us. But the road is long and uneven.

There are many ups and downs, wrong turns, cul-de-sacs, and deviations. There are so many unforeseen incidents on the way. Like the Israelites in the desert, the people of God today get tired, impatient, and angry. They want to turn back; they lose faith and confidence in their leaders; they worship idols; they sin, they fight, they forget. It is not a perfect society. It is a very imperfect people that is loved and guided by God all the time.

One of the great experiences of that time of wandering in the wilderness was the way in which God repeatedly forgave the people, gave them another chance, relented. It was the memory of God's patient love and forgiveness that sustained the people of Israel through the centuries.

What can we learn from the experience of the Exodus? The most important thing is the need to see and accept reality in all its brokenness and messiness. We do not live in an ideal Church or community.

The Platonic ideal cannot be mistaken for the reality. Community is not a static ideal that is there for us to step into. Community is a task. It is something to be aspired to and to be actualized in small ways every day. Community is not the deposit of all good things that I can dip into for my comfort and consolation. Community is the experience of living in a particular place and time. Community is this group of brothers God has given me as companions and fellow travellers. Community is human relationships of transformed by God's Holy Spirit. Community is a dynamic and changing reality.

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Community is not a given but is “created” when each one gives himself with all his imperfections to the other imperfect brothers in the community.. Community is the place of trying and of failing. It is the place of acceptance and forgiveness. It is the place where imperfect people make imperfect efforts to improve an imperfect situation.

It is the place where God’s Spirit is at work to encourage, to lead, to heal and to inspire us to keep moving upwards and onwards towards the Kingdom. And it is out of this complex and messy reality that God can enable something unexpected and beautiful to emerge.

Authentic religious community life is an invitation to live peacefully with my own imperfections and those of others while struggling to live according to the mind and heart of Christ. Love and generosity, sin and forgiveness, trying and failing, and above all trusting in the God who loves us all are the essentials of a real Christian and religious community life.