

**A COMMUNITY OF "BROTHERS"  
"A SIGN OF HOPE,  
A SOURCE OF LIFE".  
The role of affectivity.**

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*When Brothers come together in the name of Jesus to pray, they have a guarantee that the Lord will be present among them (cf. Mt 18, 20). Faith brings them together.*

The last General Chapter reminded us forcefully of the important role played by the affective life in helping our communities become a "sign of hope and a source of life".

The overall development of a person, as psychologists point out, implies the existence of "the other". "The quality of personal relations and of fraternal life should be considered as a first priority".

I think that, from the psychological point of view, the basic problem lies precisely in "living with...", in fraternal relations and their difficulties. It is clear that many personal and community problems are due to defective personal relations. And the remedy lies here also.

As we live out our relations with other people –relations which are our very life with its many facets, variety and growth— we do not think enough about them. And yet, thinking about them could help us to improve our social relations and so be happier and more successful in our apostolate.

It is useful to recall at this point the most recent and most important contributions of scientific research. Particularly important is the field opened up by depth psychology for systematic observation and reflection. This contribution becomes especially valuable when the specific nature of "the other" is considered.

Who is this "other"? The first answer that occurs is "the person who is not me". This is not enough. A Brother from central Africa, whom I shall never meet, whose photo I shall never see, who I am not sure exists as a precise person, cannot be an "other" for me. In other words, the notion of "other" presupposes a relationship of which the "other" is a part, even if this relationship is very tenuous. It might even consist in simply knowing of the personal existence of "the person who is not me". An "other" is someone who already exists for me in some way or other, even if this is only in a fleeting manner. It is someone whose existence is important for me.

"The other" is an "alter ego", but different. He has his own ways of reacting, his own ideas, hopes... One of the biggest obstacles to community life is doubtlessly the tendency to be self-sufficient. This explains the poor standard of certain conversations, and the superiority of persons who make themselves available to others, who know how to listen to them, to understand and help them, and to "live" with them.

What we have said above is of particular relevance to the problem of religious communities, which are "evangelical groups" with their own requirements. While it is true to say that these communities consist of members who are "volunteers", they are also partners who have not been chosen. These are communities based on faith that has been accepted and chosen by the group and then shared and lived together. To share faith, and profess belief in Christ as a group is the very process of evangelical conversion.

This analysis leads quite clearly to a very important conclusion in our thinking: to wish to treat religious solely as "spiritual" beings without making allowances for areas of resistance is to tyrannise them, to do violence to their nature. Human relations would be perfectly charitable if religious were pure spirits, that is, entirely transparent to themselves and to others. But there is in each one of us an area that is opaque and silent and which is one of the intrinsic obstacles to fraternal life. St Paul experienced and spoke strikingly of this interior struggle in a person, of this power that, as long as the human race lasts, is a part of something that is in itself unreal and complex.

This is how life is: "I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate" (Rm 7, 16). "I can see that my body follows a different law that battles against the law which my reason dictates" (Rm 7, 23).

We all know the extent to which this conflict makes itself felt in our daily lives. Deep down, a Brother really does want this union with others, but he has this strange feeling of powerlessness, opposition and isolation. This conflicting situation helps to create tensions and the particular type of psycho-affective suffering that leads to moral solitude and personal isolation.

Experience shows that problems connected with affectivity are not uncommon in communities. There is, for example, moral solitude which recent research shows to be quite a common problem nowadays and which is accompanied normally by isolation, depression and stress.

How can the paradox of moral solitude exist in a religious community? All its members live and share the same lifestyle. All gather regularly for prayer and around a common table. In a word, very little private life...And yet solitude exists.

The explanation lies in the fact that this solitude is of an affective nature. In fact, despite the frequency of daily contacts, absorption with personal work prevents "real relationships": its members live side-by-side with others, but not "with" others. They create no deep bonds. And so, community life which, under normal circumstances, should reaffirm identity, becomes a burden and an obstacle. In practice, it is seen as a threat to private life. The danger is isolation, which is a sign of a non-resolved identity crisis or, in other words, of non-integrated affectivity.

There are two ways – both valid theologically and philosophically – by which a person can achieve psychological equilibrium: he can attain affective integration either through marriage, or through celibacy.

Marriage, to the extent it is authentic, enables each of the two partners to achieve complete self-fulfilment and an open attitude to life. This is achieved by means of mutual "help" which is not a means, but a form of complementarity, another self but different. Without this, a person suffers from solitude, feels that life has no meaning.

Affective integration can be achieved through celibacy, a lifestyle which is perfectly valid from a psychological point of view. In this case, it is achieved by the gift of self to the human community in one form or another, and to an absolute Person, who gives meaning to one's personal life.

It is faith which recognises God as a Person who calls certain people to a life of special intimacy with him, in order to make a specific and very special gift of oneself to one's Brothers. What is involved always is a gift of oneself to a Person. What is decisive in this case is the act of faith, the value of the service in question, the genuineness of the total gift of self, the "consecration", and fidelity in terms of time "usque ad mortem".

The attainment of intimacy is linked to charity, to fraternal love. Once difficulties are overcome, consecrated celibacy is not solitude leading to isolation, but **shared friendship**.

Priority, therefore, must be given to spiritual renewal, a **sine qua non** condition if renewal in other various areas is to produce the desired results and, in particular, contribute to that interior unity which makes religious a true gift from God (EN 75).

"To live according to the Spirit" is the ideal of evangelical community life. In his great chapter 8 of the Letter to the Romans, St Paul does not use the relatively abstract term "spirituality", nor does he speak of the spiritual as something neuter to be opposed to what is temporal or material. He speaks of "life according to the Spirit" in concrete terms; he speaks of one's total life being led by the guidance of that companion of our daily lives whom Jesus has sent us. The Spirit helps man in his struggle with his passions, burdens and weaknesses.

According to the Gospel, this spiritual renewal must be founded on true conversion. St Paul spoke of this when he wrote of "becoming a new creature". It presupposes also the process by which the believer dies with Christ crucified and becomes a new man with the Risen Christ. It is the conversion of the heart spoken of by the Scriptures, the metanoia. Only the conversion of the heart enables a person to move from speculation to faith, from psychological affectivity to evangelical love and self-oblation.

On the community level, this presupposes going beyond the superficial communication of language and conventions; going beyond the promiscuity of habits and desires. It means seeking a more enriching dialogue between persons.

The presence of "the other" is not only for me a social presence: it can become intimate and spiritual, as long as I am prepared to be open to this. Only this "personal" dialogue seems capable of bringing about growth and development in the individual and of creating a genuine "us", in which individuals lose nothing of their personality while giving themselves to others without reserve. Only this spiritual "us" deserves to be called communion.

All this implies the need for certain pastoral and pedagogical measures. A religious community - a community of disciples of Jesus Christ - can truly exist only through faith. This is how the Scriptures speak of the Church: an assembly called together by God's last words, humanity which has been called and has responded. Where the call finds a response it produces an effect, through the Spirit, and a group of persons is formed into a community-communion of persons.

Paul's strong words in this connection have lost none of their relevance:

*"It is in the Christ that you have received, the Lord Jesus, that you must walk and be rooted and built up, supported by the faith we have taught you, and overflowing with gratitude. Take care that there is no one there to lead you astray, to reduce you to slavery by the empty promises of philosophy, by purely human tradition, by the things of this world and not according to Christ".*

It was the Gospel also that gave rise to **fraternity**. With the appearance of Christ, there was born an urgent need in the

world: the urgent need to love one another, forgive one another, to communicate, to share, to help one another, to leave hatred, possessions and solitude behind. Henceforward, those who have accepted the Gospel are bound by true spiritual bonds.

*"You have only one Master and you are all brothers".* We are brothers because we are disciples.

The "living-together" of the Brothers is clearly described as follows:

*"From the beginning of the Institute, the Brothers have fulfilled their mission 'together and by association'. Each Brother exercises his apostolate as a member of a community by whom he knows he is accepted, supported and entrusted with his mission" (R. 16).*

The "us" of apostolic communities is in the world by the very fact that Jesus Christ is the Lord of all men and not only of believers; by the very fact also that the Gospel gives meaning to what happens in the lives of men and in society. That is why in the lives of all Brothers' communities there is a need to personify the believers' new way of being men among men.

In order that life according to the Spirit may be a reality that is experienced more and more each day by the community of consecrated persons, all of whom have some degree of shared responsibility, the life of prayer must be a priority.

Prayer is the breath of life of all contemplative life:

*"The Brothers' community is a community of prayer. The Brothers pray together. Together they hear the word of God and meditate on it. Together they recognise that they are sinners before God and they participate in the same Eucharist. Together they seek God and it is together that they find him" (R. 50).*

The 1993 General Chapter proposed that "1995 should be for us a year especially devoted to prayer".

**In conclusion:** the command of the Lord "*Love one another as I have loved you*" (Jn 15) should lead the members of a religious community, who are mutually committed to become transformed and to be faithful unto death, to live in communion and to know one another better. For the sake of the Kingdom, it is not for us to live side-by-side with one another, but to live "with" one another in communion.

As St Paul says, sexuality is not part of our lives. On the level of faith, "*there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus*" (Gal 3. 28-29). You are all sons of God by faith.

We must therefore purify our differences but not abolish nor diminish them. We must keep them and sublimate them...

The title of a book that appeared recently: "**Je est Tu**" ("I is you", published by Jacob, Paris) gives a good definition of knowledge and love. They are one and the same thing. I would add that this is so because they differ. "I cannot unite myself with you because I am not you".

This takes us back to that final mystery which Pascal described as follows: "Everything is one, but one is in the other like the three persons". ●

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Recommendation of the 1993 General Chapter

*"Districts will organise programmes, sessions and meetings on the affective lives of the Brothers as a means of helping them to grow as individuals and as balanced and psycho-sexually mature persons" (Commission 10-2).*