

**LIFE COMMUNITIES
A NEW APPROACH
"Living in communion"
Difficulties involved.
Psycho-affective aspects. (1/2)**

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"Districts are to develop programmes, workshops and experiences on the affective life of the Brother to assist him in his personal growth as a balanced and psycho-sexually mature person" (Recommendation 3.2 of the General Chapter 1993, p. 54).

**1. Religious community:
A community of persons**

The change brought about by Vatican II regarding the way the Church should be perceived is quite remarkable. The Church, which had been considered primarily as an "institution" and as "a hierarchically structured society", was now seen as "a mystery of communion", "the sacrament of Christ in the world" (LG 1). Such a change was bound to have an effect on the way we saw religious communities.

To put it simply, we could say that in the "community-society", union was simply a means to achieve an end, the common good. Seen in this way, the community remained a collection of individuals, bound together by wise directives regulating personal relations which, for the most part, remained formal and functional.

In the "community-communion", however, the deep union existing between individuals is an end in itself: relations between its members and the creation of union are a priority. The whole of community life becomes a means to create "one heart and soul" among its members and a true communion of persons.

Whereas in the community-society, the aim of achieving the maximum common good possible can lead to the pursuit of efficiency and productivity before all else, and to the detriment of the individual; in the community-communion, the community seeks to serve the individual, accepts him with love, values his

gifts and seeks to develop them for the service of others. It does this in a spirit of mutual respect, co-responsibility and active participation in the practice of freely accepted norms. All this leads to true friendship with everyone, which is the ideal of community life.

"Living in communion" - this is the Gospel ideal for the community that wishes to live according to the Spirit. This is what our communities should be like. However, this would always remain an abstract ideal, ineffective because it is unattainable in this world, if we forget what our communities really are: communities are made up of human beings. Like any other Christian communities, which are born of grace, they are nevertheless composed of human beings and are therefore subject to psycho-social influences whose existence is presupposed in the life of all groups of people. As St Thomas said: *"Grace in a Christian community presupposes and assumes human nature, perfects it and directs it towards the accomplishment of a purpose which transcends his own strength"*.

For us, "community life" means "living with others". It represents a relationship with other individuals. As our everyday experience shows us, it is difficult. It is imperfect - differences of character irritate us: when two persons in a community detest each other, the cause is almost always a conflict of temperaments, in one way or another.

Understanding the meaning of "others" begins with the acceptance, not of another oneself, but of someone **different** from oneself. This acceptance is the act of a person with the same nature as our own, with its multiplicity of generous impulses. His act is as basic as self-awareness.

Establishing true dialogue means acknowledging the fact that one can find oneself only in others, and to the extent that they are accepted as others. True dialogue presupposes the willingness to listen to the words of others - of others as they are - and to accept and understand them.

One can immediately see how complex this relationship is with others in which we are conscious participants. It is never completely adequate, fully satisfactory or established at an optimum level. As experience shows us, this is one of the mysterious aspects of human life. The other aspect is moral solitude, to be more precise, **affective solitude**, the striking contrast of loneliness in a crowd.

2. The important function of affectivity

And so we are faced with a problem of affectivity - **affectivity** as a fundamental element in the process of personal and community maturation. It is one of the factors that have the greatest effect on the development of an integrated personality and on authentic relationships with others. A certain affective maturity is essential for a person to function properly and take an active part in community life.

Problems connected with affectivity are often encountered in clinical psychology. All conflicts have their source either in instinctive tendencies, or affective relationships. Also, certain affective experiences tend to attach to themselves, by a process of association, specific images and ideas, which come to the fore every time these experiences are evoked or forgotten, and which are called **complexes**. In depth psychology has demonstrated their negative influence on physical and mental health.

Affectivity, understood as a psychological reaction, is to be found first of all in the unconscious. Instinctive reflexes and acts always include tension followed by discharge, that is, by a relaxation, which is the unconscious equivalent of pleasure, and which constitutes the biological source of all pleasure.

The stress that traditionally had to do with reason and intelligence has its complement in the existential stress on the capacity to express one's feelings adequately. The balance between repression (inhibition) and the expression of feelings is a delicate question that is frequently discussed. When the balance is disturbed and expression is increased while, at the same time, convention and respect for authority lose their force, the usual and often heated discussions take place about what really constitutes adult behaviour.

St Paul, referring to Our Lord's words, warns us: "*You can be babies as far as wickedness is concerned,*

but mentally you must be adult" (1 Cor 14,20).

What, then, are the characteristics of adult affectivity? It should be said that, whatever measurements are applied in this matter, they are necessarily imprecise. The widely used term "maturity" is not suitable in an evaluation of the intimate aspects of personality. There is general agreement that adulthood includes the ability to anticipate danger, and control the emotions and sexual and aggressive instincts. Other characteristics include a good measure of initiative and patience, the ability to cope with frustration and solitude, the positive ability to integrate and express feelings, especially those of affection, tenderness and love.

Continuous psycho-affective growth calls for the help of educator-guides who, in the name of the faith, constantly show the different faces of God in themselves and in the Church around them; guides who, like all the saints and prophets of the Bible before them, never stop fighting for the purity of motives inspired by faith, in the face of the insidious temptations of magic, idolatry and formalistic devotion. People need to be helped to mature humanly and spiritually. They should be helped rather than feared. That is the way to openness and truth.

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