

**LIVING COMMUNITY LIFE
AS A COMMUNION
Psychological problems
Negative factors**

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"Aware of the difficulties that lie before them, the Brothers nevertheless commit themselves to the Institute in all their uniqueness as persons. They are ready to respond to the successive calls of God in the various stages of their lives" (R 42a).

Introduction

According to the Gospel, a Christian community comes into existence when persons (not individuals) come together in the name of the Lord: *"For where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them"* (Mt 18, 20).

A religious community, therefore, is something more than the sum of its individuals: it is rooted in faith-communion and in the person of its members.

That is why living in community is more a point of arrival than of departure: it implies a basic agreement on the part of the community regarding its vocational identity, its will to seek together, and its determination *to overcome the difficulties* that hinder its fulfilment.

The ideal of successful relationships is based on the notion of reciprocity. One can speak of success only - to take a simple case - if each of the two persons involved feels that there is success or, more exactly, fulfilment. This could be described as a feeling of existing fully and of feeling happy to be oneself. These feelings in the two persons are simultaneous and reciprocal.

Such a result implies that at the outset everyone is prepared to accept others, and accept them as they are, without any conscious or unconscious expectations of them. The basic problem, the key problem we are going to consider is the *negative factors* of community life.

1. Negative factors of community life

We should remember that every individual is unique, and even in cases where a form of adaptation is generally adopted, it is done so in an individual and sometimes original way, but in any case, in a way that is different from that of others. Seen from this angle, contact between one person and another has something mysterious about it, and daily experience shows us that dialogue is not easy: often it consists of monologues, or simply a dialogue between deaf persons.

The mysterious character of the human person stems no doubt from his fundamental structure as a frontier between body and mind. The individual is a being who unites within

himself two apparently heterogeneous worlds: the material and the spiritual, the temporal and the eternal. This duality seems to be the consequence of the complex structure of the human being: "a dramatically embodied mind" (R. Le Senne).

The first consequence of this human condition is well expressed by St Paul: *"I see that my body follows a different law that battles against the law which my reason dictates"* (Rm 7, 23).

We all know how this human contradiction reveals itself in daily life: in the depths of his being, a person aspires to communion with others, but at the same time he experiences a strange feeling of incapacity, opposition, isolation. This state of contradiction contributes to the creation of tensions and specifically to psycho-affective suffering which culminates in moral loneliness.

(a) Moral loneliness and community life

How, paradoxically, can moral loneliness exist in a religious community? Is it inherent in a religious vocation, or does it stem from the human condition?

Loneliness certainly exists! Circular N° 410, commenting on an Institute-wide survey, says: "Brothers withdraw from the Institute because of loneliness and lack of friendship" (p. 27, 5.1).

According to C. Rogers, we have two aspects to consider here. The first is loneliness, which stems from the profound individuality which is a basic element of human existence. You will never know what it is like to be me, and I shall never know what it is like to be you. Whether we wish to communicate ourselves entirely, or on the contrary, maintain many areas of our life private, we will always be separated from others by our fundamental singleness. In this sense, every individual is born alone and dies alone.

The other aspect of loneliness stems specifically from the problem of human relations: of persons who feel they have no real contact with anybody. There are several contributory factors to this moral loneliness.

First of all, there is the impersonal nature of our civilisation, its transitory nature, its anonymity. All these are causes of loneliness, and their impact increases as we tend to live more and more on top of one another. It seems, however, that there is an even more profound and more prevalent cause. Briefly, a person feels most lonely when, abandoning part of his "persona", part of his external "shell", the mask behind which up till then he has always hidden in his relationships, he is convinced that no one can understand, accept or love the part of his innermost being which has just been revealed.

The period after a person removes part of his defensive shell is when he is most liable to feel really lonely. He is overcome by a growing feeling that he is a stranger to others.

Moral loneliness, then, can exist on a variety of levels and in a variety of degrees, but it is particularly poignant and deeply felt by an individual when, for one reason or another, he is convinced that he is rejected by the community which stands in judgment over him.

Where does the solution lie? There is an effective remedy in a situation as dramatic as this, but it will not work unless

the individual is prepared to take the risk of being more himself in his dealings with others. Only then will he realise that he is capable of establishing human contact and of lightening the burden of his loneliness.

"Accepting the risk of being oneself is doubtlessly one of the steps which lead to the alleviation of the loneliness that is within us and to genuine relationships with others" (C. Rogers).

In fact, it is only when a person discovers that he is loved for what he is and not for what he pretends to be, not for the mask behind which he hides, that he can begin to feel really worthy of respect, esteem and love. This is what puts him into contact with others and maintains this contact.

(b) Complexes: isolating role of complexes

In addition to character disturbances of a behavioural nature (constitutional anomalies), there are also psycho-affective disturbances called complexes. These are characterised by reactive automatism intensely charged with emotion. The reaction is not purely mechanical: it is an emotional state. For rational and lucid consciousness there is suddenly substituted a consciousness affected by emotion, and in this new subjective state a reaction is released that is automatic, segmentary and not integrated.

It functions like a "system" that is always ready to be released in the relational life of the individual. It is clear immediately how such complexes isolate a person in community life: they constitute an abnormal operating "system" always ready to determine behaviour despite the person's innermost self. The abnormal reaction appears as a single response and it never varies.

Major complexes (insecurity, persecution, abandonment), which paralyse individual and community life, tend to be rare. It is the minor complexes that are found most often in religious communities, but these are sufficient to poison personal relations and, a fortiori, community life.

These are reflex reactions to signals, to immediate situations, which finally serve as trigger-mechanisms of automatic behaviour. And so there are those who "cannot stand" being looked at, darkness, crowds, lifts, being in a group. They feel discomfort, which normally shows itself physically (spasms, agitation, pallor, flushing).

We all have minor complexes which, given the right stimulus, trigger off automatic behavioural responses which are inappropriate because they do not take into account the context and the circumstances of the situation concerned. What is involved here is really the unconscious and involuntary resurgence of ready-made reactions created in the past.

Before having recourse to therapists, there are things we can do by ourselves. We can begin by identifying the recurring characteristics of our behaviour in certain typical situations. We need to define these situations and then identify the elements of our stereotyped behaviour in these situations.

Clinical psychologists suggest a number of personal means we can use to resolve complexes (see *Construction de la personne*, p. 146).

If personal means are insufficient or not available in our situation, we need to have recourse to therapy properly so called and to specialist care. Among the approaches available, much importance is now given to modern therapeutic techniques such as logotherapy, ergotherapy and especially psychotherapy.

2. Continuing formation in community life and relationships

Circular N° 410 has this to say: "The absence of specific training in interpersonal relationships is often the root cause of community conflicts and of the lack of growth in fraternal charity" (p. 30, 6.2).

Formation and updating are recommended as important means for the improvement of community life.

1° Acceptance of others

The new style of community life poses an urgent problem for formation: the ability to accept others. The primary act of a person is to accept the other, others, and to create a community of persons with them, whose structures, norms, feelings and finally institutions are marked by the kind of persons they are.

To treat others as persons, as subjects, as beings that are present, is to recognise that I cannot define them as objects or classify them. It is to recognise that they are inexhaustible, full of hopes, and that these hopes are theirs alone. It means trusting them. Generous trust is infinitely fruitful.

Genuine love makes a person distinguish, recognise and desire others as others. Natural sympathy is simply a disposition of character: genuine love is a new form of being. It is directed to what lies beyond the nature of the subject: it desires the personal fulfilment of the person as a liberation, whatever his gifts, or his failings, which have no essential bearing on the matter.

The act of loving is the strongest certainty of a person. It is the irrefutable existential "Cogito": "I love, therefore the other is", and life is worth living.

2° Communicating with...persons

The new kind of formation in community life involves learning how to communicate with others. In the first place, we have to learn to listen, to be available to others, to question ourselves. Then we need to practise understanding what is said by putting ourselves in the place of the one listening. We need to use language which is adapted to those who listen to it.

Learning to put oneself in the place of the listener is the basic principle on which the establishment of good community relations is based.

Probably the best way to define genuine communication is in terms of cooperation. Of course, the characteristics of networks, the type of work, present-day attitudes to community life can put obstacles in the way of cooperation, or discourage it, but it still remains the dynamic principle behind the use of the network such as it is, behind real participation in the work and the group, and finally behind the progress of the group towards the achievement of its aims.

The attitude of cooperation, an attitude which differs from person to person, is an attitude which is learnt. It involves a number of important aspects: belonging to the community, active participation in its life, the acceptance of active roles in the group, the feeling of co-responsibility for achievements, failures and decisions. •

Basic background reading:

C. Rogers: *Les groupes de rencontre*, Dunod, Paris.

P. Grieger: *Construction de la personne et vie communautaire*, Ancora, Milan.

R. Mucchielli, *Les complexes personnels*, ESF, Paris.