

## COMMUNICATION IN COMMUNITY

### Successful communication

**Brother Paul Griéger**

*"The community is for the Brothers their home. It is there that they live together. It is there that they experience each day anew the friendship, the esteem, the trust and the respect that they have for one another. They pay special attention to the needs of the young Brothers" (R 54).*

### 1. Community life

Vatican II attached great importance to the "koinonia" community, the communion of persons. It laid stress on relations between the members of the community, and on the psychological, moral and spiritual bonds that form them into a "living organism", and into a more or less intense spiritual entity.

A "communion" community, therefore, is based on the profound union of its members: personal relationships are of paramount importance; the whole of community life becomes a means to help the members of the community acquire "one heart and one soul", in fulfilment of Jesus' prayer, and in imitation of the first Christians who opted spontaneously for a very radical form of community life.

"The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed. They went as a body to the Temple every day but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved" (Ac 2, 44-47).

There we have the ideal: this is what our communities ought to be like.

Although the religious community is born of the Spirit and not of the flesh, it is still made up of human beings and, consequently, continues to be subject to the psycho-sociological factors that are at the basis of all community life, whatever its nature.

That is why, once we have made our basic decision through faith, the next important and necessary step is to come to understand in a detailed and precise manner what are the basic factors that help or hinder communication or the growth of personal relations on the human level, factors in which grace also plays a part. The purpose of this process is to help the community grow in charity.

After the Council, community life concentrated its attention on the individual "in a context", the individual as a concrete entity, the individual in a relationship. It rejected the idea of the solitary and isolated individual. A person develops within a group, through relations with others, through personal relations within a community, whose

maturity and development involve notions such as group, relationship and communication with others.

A first and important consequence for us in our consideration of this topic is the fundamental role of communication in community life. As George Mead, the well-known author of "The Spirit, the Self and Society" writes (p.215): "The principle which I consider to be fundamental in social human organisation is communication, and this implies participation with others".

### 2. Communication in community

Communication, in its strict and deepest meaning, is an essential human need. Communication means exchanging impressions, messages, meanings; speaking or writing in order to be understood; listening, reading or looking in order to understand, learn or know; sharing in a community or social life.

As G. Gusdorf writes, "For a man to survive spiritually, he needs not only to have people around him, but also to have closer relations with some of them and be in communion with them. Contact with others represents so many invitations to exist, so many stimuli for the self which prevent the life of the individual from succumbing to the anaesthesia and asphyxiation of an existence closed in on itself" (Treatise on Moral existence", p. 37).

As our daily experience shows us, it is probable that in our industrialised, individualistic and rational civilisation, the desire for communication is somewhat frustrated. The result of this is an increasing existential void, a source of anxiety or a deep feeling of dissatisfaction. The author we have quoted maintains that modern man suffers from profound loneliness and the absence of true communication.

Whether it is a question of relations in a community or in a group of workers, it has been observed that the reason behind many quite avoidable conflicts is quite often a lack of dialogue.

### Real communication: on a personal level

What we have been saying concerns primarily communication in a community which has its own particular requirements. It may be true that the members of the community are volunteers or disciples and that they responded freely to the call, but it is likewise true that they were brought together by an Other, their common Lord. This is why, as Vatican II reminds us, a Christian community will always have as its origin an act of faith accepted and made together and then shared and lived in communion.

The psychology of community is both complex and extensive in scope. A relationship with another person is no easier than self-knowledge. It presupposes something more than control over one's emotions: it presupposes a sort of ability to feel interiorly that goes beyond a simple intellectual understanding. It presupposes a certain style of relationship with other individuals and with groups.

A relationship with another person can develop in a number of different ways and at different depths. When two persons meet, it is always possible for one of the two not to consider the other as a person, but only as an object, a function, an obstacle. It can be simply an external and functional communication, like a meeting with the Brother Bursar, for example.

The shift from spontaneous reaction to a spiritual relationship implies an interior disposition, and the refusal to allow oneself to be blocked by character traits, function or

profession. Professional life often does not seem to take into account the deepest areas of human relations: these relations remain at a superficial, social and external level, and concerned only with appearances.

On the level of spiritual communication, it is "persons" who meet. This relationship presupposes that individuals go beyond the superficial communication of language, convention and promiscuity of habits and desires, and that they seek the possibility of a richer personal encounter.

The presence of a person need not be solely a social presence for me: it can become intimate and spiritual on condition I am open to this possibility. It is only a spiritual encounter such as this that seems able to produce integrated growth in a person, while at the same time bringing about a genuine fraternal union.

However, my personal relationship remains incomplete unless it is reciprocated and the other person accepts to allow me to be a person for him.

When this happens, there is exchange, reciprocity, presence and dialogue. Once there is exchange and reciprocity, there is communication, and language becomes once again its docile instrument, instead of being used as a screen or a trap.

### 3. Successful communication

In the light of modern psychological analysis and sociometrical research, there are several points we can consider.

The first point, and doubtlessly the most important, is that all real communication implies evolution and personal human and spiritual maturation. This is a most important observation which can help us avoid being fooled by a certain kind of very damaging sentimental idealism. Many personal difficulties and crises which affect community life and apostolic work can be explained often by a lack of faith, or by a faith that has remained infantile or adolescent, and is consequently incapable of providing a strong motive for decisions and commitments which make sense only through faith.

This brings us once again to the question of psycho-affective and spiritual personal maturity. St Paul, echoing the words of Jesus, warns us: "Brothers, you are not to be childish in your outlook" (1 Cor 14, 20). Can we say with him: "When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, and think like a child, and argue like a child, but now I am a man, all childish ways are put behind me" (1 Cor 13, 11).

This growth in all aspects of life seems to be exactly what is meant by personal maturity. It is inseparable from some form of conversion, and seems to consist in a sort of return to very source of one's being: a person becomes conscious of his vocation, of his destiny, of his existence, polarised by the very source of Being.

The emphasis that was laid traditionally on reason and intelligence finds its complement in a natural need to express one's feelings adequately. The balance between the repression and the expression of feelings is a sensitive question and is constantly discussed. If stress is laid on greater expression, and this is accompanied by a lessening of ritualism and respect for authority, we are faced with the well-known and controversial subject for debate regarding what really constitutes "adult" behaviour.

The importance of feelings in community life deserves to

be emphasised: feelings connect us to life and to others. They are a means of communication and comprehension all the more effective as they are developed and do not degenerate into sentimentality. They enable us to achieve a balance in our psychological life, and to grow emotionally by mastering and refining them. Positive feelings are the support of thought and action: they add charm to life.

Spiritual motivation: the religious community, as has already been said, involves many human aspects and all kinds of administrative, social and professional activities. Involvement in them produces a certain number of natural motives regarding them. There is nothing unusual or blameworthy about this so long as these motives remain secondary, subject to faith, which alone understands the nature of an evangelical community.

Spiritual motivation must provide the lucidity of real faith to make clear the transcendence of the mission entrusted to the religious community. It receives its mission from on high, from its Lord who has brought the community together in the Holy Spirit. All the human aspects of community life take on a different meaning given them by Jesus Christ.

Apart from motives that are incidental, purely formally legal, or useful in terms of human security, there are the very motives of Jesus Christ which become the motives of the community.

A religious community is created when persons meet in the name of the Lord: "For where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them" (Mt 18, 20). The community, then, is more than the sum of its individual members: it is rooted in a communion in faith and in the very personality of its members.

That is why "living in communion" is not only a point of departure: it is also the point of arrival. This involves a basic agreement by the community regarding the identity of its vocation, the will to seek together, and the firm resolve to overcome the obstacles which stand in the way of all this.

This seeking is the real test of the spiritual level and the quality of the faith of a religious community.

### Conclusion

Circular 410 devotes chapter II to affective life and to personal relations. Two passages from it are relevant to what we have said.

"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" (6.2 p. 30).

"The Questionnaire indicates that in the opinion of the youngest Brothers, Brothers withdraw from the Institute because of loneliness and lack of friendship...and yet, we make profession of loving" (5.1, p. 27).

That is why formation and updating are recommended as important factors in the improvement of community life, in the Church, and for the society of our day (PC 2).

*NB. Our renewal sessions this year (1995) have concentrated on communication in community and at work with a view to improving personal relations. This article is a summary of the main ideas we reflected on together. •*