

**Brothers among themselves.
Materials for a first step in formation for community life.**

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1. THEOLOGICAL BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR COMMUNITY LIFE.

MOST HOLY TRINITY, FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT.

In the history of the Church religious life is a phenomenon that we do not find explicitly mentioned in Sacred Scripture (1). Religious life as such appears in the 3rd Century around the time of the Desert Fathers (Saint Anthony, Paul the Hermit). The first manifestations of religious life that we find are those of the hermits and anchorites.

Not much later, in the same century, the coenobite life appeared around the time of Saint Pacomius and Saint Basil the Great. And so it can be said that a life in common dates practically from the very origins of the Church. And since then community life has evolved as religious life itself.

But, where and how was religious life founded?

In Matthew 18:20 we read “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” So the common life of religious, who gather together in the Lord, is set up as a type of small church.

In Perfectae Caritatis 15, we find an invitation to create a community life according to the community model proposed in Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35. It follows that religious communities need to be an incarnation of the “koinonia” (life under a common program) that the Apostles and the first Christian communities experienced:

- * They were a praying community: They gathered together in the Temple, they participated in the breaking of the bread and they prayed in common.
- * They lived in interdependence with the members of their own community. The deacons administered the material goods. With other communities “The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea” (Acts 11:29).
- * This was a community for a mission: the Apostles gave testimony with great power concerning the Resurrection of Jesus. They also did this by means of signs and wonders (Acts 5:12).
- * They were always under the influence of the Holy Spirit. “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 4:31).

As we read the testimony of the first communities in Acts it can seem that Luke was painting an ideal picture of the first communities, but surely as with any human group there must have been some difficulties. The Apostles themselves are a heterogeneous group: fishermen, tax collectors, zealots... Among these problems were bound to spring up (Matthew 18:1-3; Mark 9:33). As the community grew and incorporated more groups, the Hellenists for example, so did the resulting problems (Acts 6:1).

In Matthew 18, we also find how charity and fraternal correction ought to be present in each community (Matthew 18, 15-17).

Where do we have to search for the theological foundation of all community life?

St. John presents it to us in his 17th chapter. It is the priestly prayer of Jesus. He prays and asks the Father on behalf of all people, so that they live in perfect unity. “So that they may be one” (John 17:21). And as a model he presents to us the very union that exists between Him and the Father. “As You, Father, are in me and I in you, may they be one in us” (John 17:21). In Vita Consecrata we read: “By constantly promoting fraternal love, also in the

form of common life, the consecrated life has shown that sharing in the Trinitarian communion can change human relationships” (Vita Consecrata 41).

Therefore the religious community, like any Christian community, with its existence connected to God and to fraternal love, is, or should be, a witness on behalf of God facing the world, still distant, but tending towards the love of God. “I have chosen you to bear fruit” (John 15:16).

If we ask a person outside of the religious life what is it that he observes in a religious community, surely his answer will have something to do with a gathering of celibate persons who live together. (At first glance, only the fact of celibacy will be noted; poverty and obedience are not so visible).

And if we ask: Why do they live together? The answer most likely will center around the union of persons with the same type of restlessness, to join their strengths and be effective in their work or mission.

But don't we find the same thing in the world of business? A group of “associates” pool their capital, their efforts, ambitions...in order to obtain success in their enterprise (and we could offer many other examples).

In community life there is much more. Community life is the “God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the Risen Lord” (Vita Consecrata 42). Community life is the fruit of a pact which begins with the people of Israel. God makes a covenant with his people through Abraham, Moses...Jesus (with his Death and Resurrection), the coming of the Holy Spirit. We Christians by our baptism incorporate ourselves into this people, we form part of his Body (1 Corinthians 12ss).

The Christian community par excellence is the “local church” family (Lumen Gentium 11). The religious community is phenomenologically different than the Christian community but ontologically they are the same. Neither is superior to the other. There is no theological difference. The arguments presented up to now can be very well applied to whatever type of Christian community: parish, family, base communities...

In the religious life, community life is not an end in itself, it does not establish one's most basic identity, but it is a specific way to live out the way one follows Jesus. Community life must be a significant (never superior) prophetic form of living out a style that Jesus lived with the first apostles.

We should not forget either the meaning of filiation in religious life and its Trinitarian origin. It is God the Father who establishes an alliance with his people (brothers of the community). The community is not the result of human will. Backing it up is the will of God. It is not born because of camaraderie or friendship. It is a gift of God the Father. All together in “Koinonia” they devote the lives to following Jesus Christ, the Son and they do this always accompanied by and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

This filial relationship creates a group of Christians (Brothers) who together go in search of God, professing the evangelical counsels.

But also the horizontal dimension of community life must come to the fore. In this dimension ties of friendship are created, there are circumstances which bring with them an authentic conversion, always open to what others may ask of us and to the resultant response as a consequence. Also it is a space where reconciliation takes place. The community is a place where different persons socialize together (Acts 6:1-7; 10-17; 12:1-3; 15:36-41; Galatians 2:7-10; 6:11; 1 Corinthians 1:11-13; 11:17-22). So then persons form the community and the community forms persons. They are a witness to God's Covenant, persons who may have certain motives for not living in common. Nevertheless because of their vocation they live in common.

In summary, observing the relationship of filiation and fraternity that exists in every community we see its purpose is not to come together to respond to the immediate pastoral needs of the Church but to witness to essential Gospel values with its life.

The community is a group of persons who hear the call of God under a particular charism, who search for personal perfection while wanting to be a sign and symbol of the “Koinonia” of the Trinity, imitating the acts of the first Christian communities and witnessing to the gift of fraternity. •

(1) We should not forget that in the time of Jesus there were special sects who had a common lifestyle and who lived life in search of purification and sanctity.