

Community Life and the Apostolate

When we reflect on arriving at a proper perspective of what community life means for us, it is important to clarify the nature of our community life together. Community life will mean one thing for the trappists or for cloistered religious, while it will mean something quite different for our congregations engaged in the active apostolate. We need to recognize the **apostolic nature of our community**.

Community implies much more than just living under the same roof, eating a meal together, even praying together; it must become a place of honest communication in trust and mutual respect. Community life should be a space in which we can share our deepest dreams and hopes which shape our identity, just as Gaspar and Maria de Mattias had dreams and were able to enthuse others with their dreams. That is how our communities were formed in the first place! And it is in the sharing of our histories and traditions and in transmitting them from one generation to another that we grow in communion and we reaffirm time and again who we are and what are the values which we share as a community. Living community life is about sharing in a profound respect and gratitude for the dreamers of yesteryear. In the Eucharistic Table whose dreams are shared and put onto the Table to be celebrated and remembered.

Often in community life, we have inflicted wounds on ourselves. The younger members at times in their impatience do not recognize the contributions and lifetime of hard work and dedication and Christian witness of their predecessors, and at the same time, it can be that the older members criticize and find fault with the ideas and initiatives of the younger members who search for new ways of expressing the charism and spirituality for this day. We need to somehow heal these wounds which, if left alone, can fester and embitter the spirit.

As religious communities under the title of the Blood of Christ, we are called to mission through the Blood. How important it is that we discern together where we hear and see the Cry of the Blood in today's world and in our day-to-day living! We are not mavericks. We are not individualists. We are in a community-with-a-mission. Too often we go about our business completely oblivious as to what the other person is doing. And unfortunately, sometimes we don't even care. We are so concerned about doing a good job ourselves!

We often boast that hospitality is a characteristic of our communities. Strangers and guests feel welcomed in our midst as we open our doors to receive them as we would receive Christ. Indeed living a true spirit of hospitality is an important part of our life in community.

Living hospitality in community life is much more than being good hosts to visitors, although this is important! But much more basic to the concept of hospitality is that of "breaking and sharing the bread of the Eucharist in our daily life together". It is about being hospitable with those with whom we live. It is about opening the door of our hearts in order to invite our sisters and brothers in and inviting them to share themselves with us. It is about sharing with the other in our relations in community in the totality of our everyday life. This type of hospitality is not easy. It is surely much more difficult to be "hospitable" with the sister or brother with whom I live everyday than with a guest who is just passing through! How can we maintain an attitude of hospitality towards our fellow sisters and brothers without putting a label on them and boxing them in, often not permitting them to change or to grow? Are we hospitable with one another at the end of a long day when we gather together? Do we invite others with our attitudes and openness to share their stories and their experiences with us? Our spirituality invites us to be "Eucharist communities" opened to that quality of communication in the totality of our lives.

We are an apostolic community which wishes to model our lives on the ideal of community proposed in the Acts of the Apostles (2, 42-47). The yearning for communion is engraved in the soul of every human being of all times. We are a people marked by a Trinitarian God who is communion and relationship. Married couples, bound in the sacrament of Matrimony, are called to witness to the world and to all of us religious, the fidelity and the nature of God's love for all of us. And we are called also to be "sacraments of communion" for a broken and fragmented world. Reconciliation in community life is not an option which we can leave or take. It is a must! It is essential to our call. This call to prophetic witness is more important today than ever.

We are called to witness to the project of communion which God has for all of Creation! ***"I pray, Father, that they may be one, as You and I are one!"(John 17, 21)*** This is God's plan for all of humankind, spoiled by our sin and selfishness, but reconciled in the Blood of Christ! The quality of our communitarian witness is an important aspect of the "new evangelization" to which John Paul II summons us. We have been called *to community for a common mission* and our life shared in community will give authenticity to our apostolic lives of service. We might call our "fraternal life in community" our ***first apostolate***.

We are called to be **prophets of a new humanity**, witnesses and constructors in the world today of that divine Project for all. We must become **living sacraments of reconciliation** giving radical witness that the Reign of God and the community that God wills is possible! We give witness to this possibility, as we grow in communion with one another, even though as human beings we each have our own unique character, our different options, our different theologies and church models, our different talents and gifts, and yet we can live together in true love and respect. The competitiveness which so characterizes society today is discarded and replaced by a deep **respect and gratitude** for the differences which mark us and which only add to our collective beauty.

We celebrate this sacramentality especially when we gather at the Eucharistic Table and when we can look each other in the eye and we know deep down that we are brothers and sisters. In a world where racism and prejudices abound and divide people and breed hatreds, we **celebrate our cultural diversities and are reconciled in them** when we share a Common Cup at the Eucharistic Meal. Then, and only then, can we say with Jesus: "This is my body and my blood given freely for you!" We promise each other fidelity and mutual care. We promise "to be there for one another" in one's need and we commit ourselves to forging unity and communion as we drink from the Cup, the Blood of Reconciliation. We thus become witnesses of reconciliation in diversity.

Living true community is both a gift and a task. It is a gift because Christ has opened the way for us with His death and resurrection. He has shown us the way and has conquered the sin that destroys community. Through His Blood we are healed and we are reconciled.

We are called to look upon Community in its proper perspective, as the place where we will find the Lord. We will learn to see our sisters and brothers as mediations of God's revelation to us and then we will never be too busy to open our hearts in hospitality to invite them in and to share the bread of life together. We need patience as God is patient with us, affirming us with His love, in spite of our shortcomings and repeated failures. We must love one another with that same unconditional and endless love with which God loves us. And reconciling ourselves in community is also about *forgiveness*. We have all been hurt at one time or another. We all carry our wounds. And we have all hurt others and are still capable of doing it again.

But we should not be discouraged. The tensions, difficulties, misunderstandings and lack of unity we sometimes encounter in our imperfect communities also form part of God's Project of

Communion for us. The road to a reconciled community necessarily endures the experience and the participation in the Passion and Death of Christ. The Paschal Mystery continues to be at the heart of the dynamics of community building. It is only in dying to our individualism and our selfishness that we will be able to be reborn to a new community life which will be a light in the mist of a fractured and divided world.

(Fr. Barry Fischer, C.P.P.S., "Towards a Reconciled Community Life," an address given at an International Spirituality Workshop for the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, Rome, September 1995.)