



## *SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY LIVING*

*“Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12).*

Life in common has always been considered, both by the Founders of the various congregation and by the Church, as an essential part, and a fundamental observance for the growth of religious life and effective organization of the apostolate. Even our Blessed Mother, gradually understood that God was asking her to place her work on the solid foundation of a religious congregation: *“After bidding farewell to court life, to devote herself entirely to the missions, she worked alone for three years. Then she sought her collaborators, who would join her, driven by love of God and poor missions, founding a pious association, which was named as the Sodality of St. Peter Claver for the African missions. But God showed her a better way: with the help of experience, the wish of her first companion Melania, who desired a life consecrated to God, and then after reading the Rule of St. Ignatius of Loyola found the sure basis for the continuation of the Sodality”* (See on Sodality).

Throughout her history, the Church has seen the birth of an infinite multiplicity of forms of community life. All, however, based the foundation and the evangelical model following the community initiated by Jesus with his disciples: *“The Lord Jesus instituted twelve to be with him and to send them to preach”* (Mk. 3:14), which was extended in a new way in the community of Jerusalem after Pentecost where *“Christians were one heart and one soul”* (Acts 4:32) and *“They were assiduous in listening to the teaching of the apostles and in fraternal union, in the breaking of the bread and prayers”* (Acts 2:42). Both are the fruits of faith in Christ, which is expressed in leaving everything to follow Jesus and make one's goods available to others. At the beginning of the gift of the religious community is Christ who, docile to the Father, inaugurated this “form of life” and lights up its everlasting meaning.

### **A Gift from God**

The religious community, even before being a human project, is a gift of the Spirit: it is a family gathered in the name of the Lord and is part of the plan of God who wants to communicate his life of communion. It is from the *gift* of communion that the commitment to building fraternal communities flows. In its tendency towards God, in communion and in the mediation of the sisters, our community becomes one heart and one soul: *“Your soul - writes St. Augustine - is no longer yours, but of all the brothers and their souls are yours, or rather, their souls together with yours are no more than one soul, the only soul of Christ”*.

Also Blessed Maria Teresa was aware that life in community is not done just with human efforts alone, but that it is a grace. On the feast of St. Peter Claver in 1917 she wrote to her daughters: *May St. Peter Claver obtain for us the grace to love one another “with works and in truth, because where there is charity, there is peace and joy ...”*.

In a lecture to the sisters on altruism she says: *“My dear daughters, Caritas Christi erget nos! “The charity of Christ urges us on! It was charity that brought us here together”*. It is an essential condition - says the Blessed Mother *“to bear each other reciprocally. To be able to do this, you need grace, since such behaviour does not start from nature ... With the word ‘endure’ I do not mean a certain resignation; rather, one must suffer the weaknesses of the other ... The Lord has not brought us together out of penance, but by grace, so that we may help each other to reach heaven (cf. ascetic conferences, March 3, 1905).*

The theologian Jean Galot SJ writes: *“Living together is achieved through grace, which certainly requires our active and dynamic cooperation and the ideal that communities are founded in the name of Christ try to live a great love together. The human heart aspires to live together in the gift of itself, but it is first of all a desire of Christ and the expression of the eternal plan of the Father who wished to bring together in community those whom He wanted to make his children in Christ. Community life is not primarily living one’s own love, but it is personally living the love of Christ; we receive from him who called us, the love that brings us together in community”.*

## **Charity, Soul of the Community**

St. John Paul II in a general audience said: *“The importance of fraternal charity is the soul of the community and therefore is an essential value of common life documented in the pages of the Gospel. The early Christians were recognized and esteemed for mutual love. It was said of them: Look how they love each other”*, and the pagans were converted because they saw the beauty and importance of their love for each other.

Blessed Maria Teresa, having received and understood the call from God, had as her only passion the glory of God and the cooperation in the salvation of souls. Her concern was that all members should pursue the same goal. At the same time, she was convinced that to achieve this goal, the sisters had to be united and would not neglect mutual love because: *“For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they see, cannot love God, whom they do not see”* (1 Jn 4:20). It would be wrong, she says, *“to have come here for the love of God in favour of the poor Africans, without extending this love above all to those who are closest to us. God first, then the superiors and the sisters, and then the poor Africans. This is well-ordered charity (on altruism). And again, she says: “The sisters have the greatest right to our charity, to our help and to our prayers... the Mother and the sisters must occupy the first place in our hearts* (ascetic conferences March 3, 1905). We can be daughters of the Father together only by extending sisterly love towards one another. Those who are daughters of the same Father necessarily have fraternal bonds among themselves.

In the conferences and letters of the Blessed Mother to the communities, we find a wealth of teachings for living the spirit of community life. Above all, in the letter to the community of Rome on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1905 she explains that mutual love does not consist in feelings, but above all in works. *“In a religious house, charity should be expressed through works... Not in compliments, it is precisely here that we often find the opportunity to be helpful to others. ... All our behaviour must show that we love our spiritual family with all our hearts.”*

She also speaks of the defects that offend charity. Among other things: *“Indifference, thinking only of oneself and not paying attention to others ... is pure selfishness; judging others and recklessly processing the mistakes of others; not to respect customs. We should be unanimous, especially regarding the changes in the assignments; how ugly is the mania for innovations: that nothing remains, change everything! If we become disunited, our fall is certain.*

## **United for Missions**

All the fruitfulness of religious life depends on the quality of fraternal life in common. The love of Christ, accepted and lived authentically within the community, builds communion, becomes the support and distinctive element of the fraternity, and realizes the missionary aspiration of Christ: *“that all may be one ... so that the world may believe ...”* (Jn 17: 21). Fraternal life intends to reflect the depth and richness of the Church, which is essentially a mystery of communion: *“People gathered by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”* The mission of consecrated life is to make visible the communion of the Triune God.

In the Decree about the renewal of religious life *Perfectae Caritatis* we read: *"The unity of the brothers manifests the advent of Christ (cf. Jn 13: 35; 17: 21), and from it emanates great energy for the apostolate"*. Pope John Paul II in a speech to religious men and women says: *"All the fruitfulness of religious life depends on the quality of fraternal life in common"*.

Our Blessed Mother writes: *"The vocation to our congregation is primarily a vocation to the apostolate.... We live our vocation in the community with a spirit of sacrifice, of poverty, with extreme external simplicity and the internal spirit of great brotherhood (cf. Cenni). Our constitutions say that this 'brotherhood' or fraternity and unity in the community are in themselves evangelizing and guarantee the authenticity of the announcement of the Good News. Our mutual unity is a testimony to the world. We live together for a fruitful apostolate, and at the same time, the apostolate leads us to unity: Our community is the place and subject of the mission; in it we plan apostolic activity which becomes the result of a shared feeling and expression of fraternal communion. Each apostolic work belongs to the community, which entrusts its concrete implementation to the individual sisters. A sense of common mission inspires personal fidelity and builds community (See Const. Art 46 §2).*

Pope Francis expresses the mission of consecrated life with these words: *"From the joy of the meeting with the Lord and his call springs the service in the Church, the mission: to bring the consolation of God to the men and women of our time, to bear witness to His mercy"*.

The Mother Foundress was also convinced that the unity of the sisters in the community is fundamental for a fruitful apostolate: *"Unity is strength. Union makes the small great, but division makes the great small". We are small, but our strength lies in unity and through this unity we can do great things for God and for the mission. If we become disunited, our fall is certain"* (cf. ascetic conferences).

## **Spirit of Family**

The community spirit makes a religious house a family. *"In faith we see ourselves as Spouses of Christ, living temples of the Holy Spirit, and as such, esteem each other, love each other ... and help each other as sisters even at the cost of sacrifices; they must share joys and sorrows, and always prefer the common good. In a religious house as well as in a good Christian family there should be reciprocated love, where all are full of mutual charity, and share in the joys and sorrows, helping each other wherever possible. The family Spirit in the religious house must be cared for in the most perfect way possible, because it is not the bonds of flesh and blood that bind the members to each other, but supernatural values that keep us united (cf. ascetic conferences).*

## **The Eucharist Unites Us**

As an old saying goes: *"a family that prays together stays together"*, prayer strengthens bonds in families. When this bond grows, love grows. Above all by participating in the Eucharist we are more closely united with Christ and with one another. It is the Holy Spirit who unites us in one Body. *"... in Holy Communion we are united with Jesus and mutually among ourselves"* says the Blessed Mother (Letter 25.12.1904).

Sister Jandl speaks of how important the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is, in our communities: *"On her travels, arriving in the city, she immediately went to visit the Blessed Sacrament in some church. As soon as she opened a new house, her first thought was to obtain permission to keep the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel"*.

Maria Teresa wanted her daughters to have a great devotion and love to the Blessed Sacrament, because God is worthy of all our love: *"All our work, our care, our efforts, desires and thoughts must serve honour and glory of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Jesus must be all our love, our passion, our*

*longing, our desire and our end! So, this new year will be happy for us too” (Letter 01.01.1914). Again, she says, “Holy Communion is the Bread of the Soul, and the bread was offered to us by God as in the Our Father ‘as nourishment for each day’. O my dear daughters! What immense advantages are found in the frequent and worthy reception of Holy Communion. Somehow it imposes a sweet pressure on us to live better and with more zeal. Who would still dare to tolerate in their hearts a voluntary antipathy towards their sister... participating almost every day at the Lord’s table?” (Letter 2. 02. 1906).*

To all the difficulties that threaten harmony, a higher energy responds through the Eucharist that allows us to safeguard the union. The aforementioned Father Galot SJ says that we can never forget that with this sacrament the words of Jesus pronounced during the Last Supper “*as I have loved you*” enter in us to become a reality. Eucharistic Christ soaks our hearts to make us able to love like him. This is why the Blessed Mother gives so much importance to the daily Eucharist and communion and suggest frequenting the sacrament as often as possible. She was convinced that it is He who makes us capable to live together, as it is clear from the letters she writes to the communities, especially in the period of Easter and Christmas when she shows a great desire to be united with her daughters, her consolation being spiritual unity, and she always refers to the Eucharist that unites them: *In these days I find myself especially among you, in a particular way in our dear chapel in front of the Blessed Sacrament and in front of the crib in the great hall. Where my spirit is there is also my heart...; we are not separated neither in spirit nor in heart ...* (Letter 22.12.1901).

*“On Christmas night, in which ... we all will have the joy of receiving the Lord in Holy Communion, we should be spiritually close to each other as much as possible. Let us all pray for one and one for all” (letter of 21.12.1905). “The celebration of Christmas brings us together spiritually in a wonderful way, particularly in two moments, in which we really feel one: during the midnight Holy Mass, especially at the moment of Holy Communion, and then in the evening around the cradle, to sing hymns in His honour. We therefore want to celebrate the lovely celebration united in charity* (Letter 20.12.1910).

It is Jesus who makes us one. The more we are united with Jesus, the closer we are to each other in the community. In Jesus we can be and do as the Blessed Mother wished: to forget ourselves and therefore serve the other in humility, forgive each other as Jesus forgave us and give our life for the other as Jesus gave his life for our salvation. *“We all serve the same Lord, we aim together to the same goal: the acquisition of perfection, and we engage in the same work: that of saving souls. Looking at our sisters in this way and having supernatural relationship with them it will be easy for us to love all of them”* (Ascetic conference 03.03.1905).

#### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:**

- What does ‘one body, one spirit’ mean for me? How did Mother Foundress live it?
- No human strength can be as great as that which comes from being united with the sign of faith. What can we do to truly be a community that lives and proclaims the Gospel in today’s world?
- What are the gifts or the things that I offer to the community?
- What do I receive from the community and what do I expect from it?
- Am I able to recognize the ‘beauty’ in each member of the community?

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