

Communion, Mission and Witness Communal Dimension

56. Since the consecrated life is an image of church communion in its internal workings, it is an expression of the mutual charity in love which distinguishes Christ's disciples. From the beginning and to this very day, the passage of the Acts of the Apostles describing the Christian community as one in heart and mind (cf. Acts 4:32) has remained open to a vital exegesis. The fathers call it the "holy koinonia." Vatican II proposed it as the paradigm of community life

The life of communion takes its inspiration from the fraternal communion manifested by Christ in the law of mutual love and by the fellowship and equality of his disciples (cf. Jn. 20: 19-23), in the image of the Trinity (cf. Jn. 17:21-23). For some, unity in love is an obligation allowing them to enjoy the continual presence of Christ promised to those gathered in his name (cf. Mt. 18:20). For others, it is a question of reproducing the community of the apostles in mission. As a result of the evangelical character of the vocation, sometimes a community draws its inspiration from various biblical models: the model of Nazareth, the home in Bethany (cf. Lk. 10:38-42), the group of disciples chosen to be with the Master (cf. Mk. 3:13-14) or the women disciples who follow and serve him (cf. Lk. 8:1-3). Others are inspired by the Last Supper in the Upper Room, by the Lord's appearance and presence in the midst of the disciples (cf. Jn. 19:23) or the wait with Mary, the mother of Jesus, for the coming of the Spirit (cf. Acts 1:14).

The reality of community life has also been expressed in a variety of symbols: fellowship, church, assembly, temple made up of living stones, a body having different members, a circle with God as its center. In this circle, under the inspiration of charity, all the rays converge with the effect that the closer we are to God, the closer we are to our brothers and sisters, and the closer we are to our brothers and sisters, the closer we are to God.

The diversity of types of community expresses the variety of images and values in the church. Monastic stability expresses in prayer and work the fellowship of liturgy and life; the itinerant community manifests the evangelizing church setting out on mission, however needing to preserve unity; and a community dedicated to organized apostolic activity expresses the solidarity, effectiveness and fidelity of a common endeavor. There are also communities living among the poor or other needy groups, bearing witness to the church's closeness to them. Finally there are groups or individuals such as consecrated virgins, hermits or members of secular institutes who take part in various workplaces where they, like Gospel leaven, share the everyday activities of modern life as well as the anxiety and the poverty of the most marginalized.

For all of these, community life is an ideal and a means to follow. Christ wants his

disciples to be configured to this transcendent model of the Trinity reflected in community. However, it is a taxing journey which requires maturity in both human and evangelical virtues; a sharing in fellowship and friendship in the joys and sorrows of life; a solidarity in the apostolic mission; and a constant generosity in mutual love to the point of giving up one's life.

In the community dimension the vocation of the individual leads to an awareness of a "convocation" by God. Consecration becomes an experience of communion and of coming together in the love of Christ, and mission is a call to share the apostolic ideal. Although they have a purely personal dimension, it is in communion that the evangelical counsels take on their authentic human and divine dynamism, that is: chastity as maturity in interpersonal relationships; poverty as a sharing of material and spiritual goods; and obedience in freedom as a convergence and unity of intentions and work—under the guidance of authority—in the practice of dialogue and community discernment in what is for the greater glory of God.

Fraternal Communion and Fraternal Life in Common

57. The dimension of fraternal communion is a constitutive part of every form of consecrated life, in that it is a sign of what the church is in her mystery. In the church as communion—an image of the Trinity—the consecrated life is presented as a visible, prophetic reminder of the communion which the whole church must already be living and which, at the same time, is her ultimate goal.

The concrete ways in which this dimension is realized, however, differ greatly among the various forms of the consecrated life and within communities of the same type as well. In fact, consecrated persons such as hermits, consecrated virgins living in the world and consecrated widows embrace an individual form of consecration beyond any forms of association which they might undertake. They achieve fraternal communion substantially in their relationship to the church and her mystery as such. The members of religious institutes and societies of apostolic life concretize this fraternal communion in forms of common life, but in as many different ways as there are institutes and societies, each according to their own charism and purpose. Although the members of secular institutes do not live a common life, they express fraternal communion in their profound bond with their own institute or by forming groups for living a fraternal life.

The first reference point of fraternal communion is the faith by which the many become one heart and mind (cf. Acts 4:32). Community calls upon the faith of the church, expressing, celebrating and fulfilling it. An act of faith is never a solitary act. Faith generates communion in virtue of the central mystery of the Christian faith, the Trinitarian mystery. The confession of the Trinitarian faith recognizing God as "mutual gift" does not cancel out the differences: Communication presupposes

distinction.

Fraternal communion is rooted and founded in charity because through charity, the bond of perfection (cf. Col. 3:14), we have passed from death to life. The summit of community life is the eucharist. The consecrated person does not place his hope in an ideal—no matter how noble it may be—but in the person of the risen Lord. Jesus' resurrection, to which consecrated persons bear witness, opens them up to hope for total fulfillment in the future. Bearing witness to the risen Christ means becoming apostles. Thus, the dimension of fraternal communion in the consecrated life becomes the bearer of the good news of God's liberating love.

In group expressions of the consecrated life—religious institutes, secular institutes, societies of apostolic life—following Christ, the poor, chaste and obedient one in company with others means becoming an example in the church and in the world. In other words, it means that apostolic fraternal communion, in its various forms and in conformity with each group's nature and purpose, bears witness to faith, hope and charity.

Growing in Communion

58. The common life in itself is charged with supernatural and spiritual value. First and foremost the accent must be placed on "being" communion, and afterward on "doing" something. Action cannot precede being. Since consecration in itself is a gift which God has given to his church, the fraternal life in common is also a gift which comes from God and which the members of an institute or society must first of all receive. Afterward, the members must preserve and develop this gift by the means found in the Spirit, each according to its nature, character, spirituality and end. Any type of strict uniformity exercised among various communities or within individual communities produces a negative effect on the identity of the charism of the institute or society.

The religious community, regardless of the concrete form it may assume because of the nature and goal of the institute, should not fail to take into account certain elements to bring about an authentic renewal. Therefore, the community ought to be the place in which—through personal and communal prayer according to the spirituality proper to each institute—the experience of God can mature for each member and be shared with others. The community ought to be a place where mutual love matures and is fulfilled, and where freedom and solidarity are not seen as separate entities, but as mutually inclusive in virtue of an effective participation in the paschal mystery. The community must be a witness, a proclamation, a service and a gift to others in the apostolate of silence, prayer and penance, or in the apostolate of works, contributing to the church's mission in accordance with the charism of the institute.

The community is, in the famous expression of medieval tradition, "the school of the service of the Lord" and the "school of charity." It is therefore a community of disciples in continual formation so that they might grow together in Christ through a communication and commitment which is always inspired by mutual charity.

Service of Authority and Communion

59. The service of authority is fundamental to the order of fraternal life. For this reason the religious community or society of apostolic life must be under the authority of a superior whose primary task is to work to build a fraternal community in which God is sought and loved above all other things.

It is necessary to reflect on what has been so rightly stated in *Mutuae Relationes*, a document which describes the functions of religious superiors in analogy with the ministry of teaching, sanctifying and governing proper to pastors and bishops in particular.

Whoever presides over the community should see himself first of all as a master of the spirit who, exercising a function or ministry of teaching, imparts true spiritual direction to the community and an authoritative teaching exercised in Christ's name about the charism of the institute. Superiors serve God in the measure in which they promote the authenticity of community life and serve their brethren by helping them to fulfill their vocation in the truth.

Inasmuch as they authentically interpret a collective charism shared by all the members of the community, superiors must be capable of letting themselves be helped and enlightened by their council and the other structures of participation or consultation. In fact, all the members of an institute share the responsibility of fulfilling the founding charism. This shared responsibility is expressed precisely through consultative or participative bodies, which vary from one institute to another, depending on their own nature and purpose. The superior fulfills a ministry of sanctification on behalf of all the members of the institute or community. Such a function is expressed in the growth of the life of charity of individuals and community in the observance of the evangelical counsels in accordance with the spirit of the institute.

Through the service of authority community life is ordered to its own particular end and charism. The role of authority is that of a sure and authoritative guide, of inspiration and encouragement so that an environment of fraternal communion can be created, one which can facilitate personal spiritual growth and the fulfillment of the apostolic mission, without, however, declining the responsibility to decide whenever necessary.

In order for this threefold ministry of teaching, sanctifying and governing to be exercised correctly, the administration of a community should be both spiritual and personal in nature so that a true spiritual relationship may be established among all its members.

Life of Communion and Apostolate

60. The charism of the apostolate is a common patrimony. All members of an institute or society participate in it by their vocation and, responding to the gift of consecration, are open to its sanctifying activity. In this way, they form a community, a group organized in common life and works, bearing public witness to divine charity in the church and in the world. Here, there is a true shared responsibility, even if lived according to the various functions performed.

Fraternal life in common cannot be separated from apostolic activity, otherwise a dangerous separation would result. Apostolic activity is essentially communal, even when it is performed by individual members.

Christ is the origin of fraternal life in community and of apostolic mission. Christ calls to himself those whom he chooses and invites them, as belonging to a particular institute or society, to extend his mission in the world under a particular aspect. Therefore, the basis of their being gathered in a single apostolic activity is their love for Christ, who calls individuals and sends them on a communal mission.

There must be a growing awareness that the apostolic mission is given as a charism by Christ, first and foremost, to the founder or foundress. This is a collective charism passed on to each member and to individual communities only through the institute which extends the charism in time. The individual mission comes from Christ but is part of the church's one hierarchical mission, in communion with the pope and the college of bishops, and is mediated by the institute because it is a share in a common mission. Therefore, every member is personally responsible for fulfilling this mission and ought to live the specific mission he has received from the superiors as the mission of the whole institute. The mission given by the superior in the name of the institute guarantees that the activity performed by the individual or a particular community is consistent with the mission of the whole institute in communion with the universal and particular church.

For the total document see- *Working Paper for October 1994 World Synod of Bishops*.
<http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/synreliq.htm#2>