



FORMATION AND CATECHESIS

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# Community life: “A sea of love and a sea of suffering”

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# Jubilaevum



I am happy to be able to share with my confreres some reflections that is the fruit of my 55 years of Passionist life.

The first point is about the joy of being a member of the Congregation, my charismatic family, no less important than my biological family. In meetings and celebrations with others I often express this sentiment-- the “Passionist Congregation” is the most beautiful family that exists; it is a wonderful family! The reason is simple—it is my family. Without this experience there is no reason to live in community or for enthusiasm.

Perhaps because of my age or my formation, today I live the experience of the psalmist: “How good and how pleasant it is, when brothers dwell together as one! Like fine oil on the head, running down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, upon the collar of his robe. Like dew of Hermon coming down upon the mountains of Zion. There the LORD has decreed a blessing, life for evermore!” (Ps.133) Nor do I know



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how I arrived at this point. But every day I ask myself-- "What can I do today to make my confreres happy?" If a brother, on the other hand, is sad, I ask myself this question-- "What have I done wrong today?"

A second point-- community life is a great gift from God, and understandable only from a faith perspective. The humanities - psychology, sociology, etc. help us understand the interpersonal dynamics within the community, but the beauty of "living in a community" comes from faith and experience. To paraphrase the Thomist principle, *agere sequitur esse*, [action follows being] we must say that *at the basis of any error there is a mistaken thought*. This means that my way of living in a community depends on the concept I have of community. It seems to me that today we have replaced the theological meaning of "community" with a sociological meaning. And this is where the problems begins, because the "rules" of the Holy Spirit are different from the "rules" of sociology.

**"Community" is a theological concept**

Pope Francis, during his meeting with the Superiors General (2014), said that "the central issue of the Church and of consecrated life is communion". Looking at the recent documents of the Church, we realize how true this is. Today we strongly feel the need to question ourselves about community life. When I organize formation courses for religious communities, 90% of the superiors ask me

to talk about "life in community". In the dialogue with communities it is obvious that we have lost the theological concept of community. Our living together has a theological underpinning; not a social one. It is not from sociology and psychology that we can "agree" about living in community; rather it is from our baptism. Apart this theological reality it is complicated to create "communion of life" in religious community.

"Community" has its origin and its principle in baptism. The "life of communion" is the "new life" that we received in baptism; it is a gift, which is welcomed, not earned. With baptism, we entered into communion with the Most Holy Trinity, which is love and communion. We have become "beings in relationship". This is what is new!

The three words of baptism-- Father, Son and Holy Spirit-- are not a formula; they create an "ontology" -- we are placed in communion with the Most Holy Trinity, we become "men of communion". Community life, apart from the baptismal dimension, based on norms and laws, becomes unbearable. In the past, community life was punctuated by the "bell". Today the "bell" no longer works. It is necessary to "theologize" the community starting from the Trinitarian life received in baptism. Community is beautiful when it reflects the beauty of Trinitarian communion. If we understand this, everything becomes easier and more beautiful.

**The sadness of individualism**

Individualism is to "dehumanize" a human being and imprison the life of communion that we received in baptism. The life of relationship and communion lies in our biological and theological being. Communion and relationship are written in our spiritual and biological DNA; living in a community should not be an effort-- it is part of our nature, for several reasons.

First, because we were created in the "image of God" (Gen.1:27) and God is communion; God is Trinity. Secondly, because our life originated from the love-union of two people, our parents. Third, because our "biological origin" began with the "communion" of two cells-- the egg and the sperm. Everything in us speaks of communion. Therefore it should be more problematic to live in a context of individualism rather than communion.

We must admit, however, that apart from sin (sin =



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“separation”), there are other factors that fuel individualism:

- wounds related to our personal history, in particular those that concern the area of affectivity and self-esteem.
- a culture of the “I”, identified by Freud, which does not favor the culture of “we” (promoted by Pope Francis).
- consumerism that pushes more and more towards a culture of “happiness” (linked to the self), to the detriment of the culture of “joy”, linked to the “we”, to relationship. One can be happy alone; but joy is relational, communal.

### **Community life:**

#### **“a sea of love and a sea of pain”**

For us Passionists, community life is “constitutional”; it is the foundation of the Congregation-- “*Saint Paul of the Cross gathered companions to live together*” (Const. 1). To underestimate this dimension of Passionist life is to lose our identity.

We cannot deny, however, that community life is sometimes a ‘*maxima poenitentia*’ [great penance]. This is because our human weakness is involved-- misunderstandings, jealousies, envy, competitiveness. We are “*wound perpetrators*” (psychological, moral, etc.). When a wound is not cured, we are not at peace with ourselves or with others and every relationship can become a source of suffering.

The injured person, who is not aware of his injuries or who rejects them, is a person who injures. A “*wounded memory*” (negative experiences that are part of one’s personal history and are remembered) negatively affects interpersonal relationships. It is difficult to love yourself and the community with a “*wounded memory*”. It needs to be cured. “*Wounded memory*” heals with love. “*The Passion of Jesus is the most effective remedy*” to heal a wounded memory (paraphrasing Saint Paul of the Cross). In fact, only the love of the Father, manifested in Christ on the Cross, can heal wounds, and turn them into “*glorious wounds*”, like those of Christ after the Resurrection.

We Passionists, in the “*maxima poenitentia*” live the true passiological meaning of community life. Love always has a sacrificial dimension and a dimension of celebration, of glory. These are present in the Passion of Jesus according to St. John, the Gospel that is proclaimed (or used to be proclaimed) in the celebration of religious profession. The sacrificial dimension-- the Son who “sacrifices

himself” for us-- “*Lay down my life*” (Jn. 10:17), as well as a dimension of celebration, of glory-- “*Therefore, God exalted him*” (Phil. 2:9). It is the “*Spirit, the Consoler*” that Jesus sends us that makes sacrificial love a feast, a joyful celebration.

Love in community is recognized by these two dimensions: sacrifice (= service) and joy. A love-service that does not create joy is not true love (it could be a pathology!). Love that is only a party is not love or, at least, it is not “*passiological love*”. Love demands sacrifice-- the “*sacrifice*” of selfishness and individualism. It is this sacrifice that makes me a man in relationship, of peace, of joy.

In the evening, when a child sees his father return from work tired, dirty, and sweaty, he is not ashamed of him in front of friends but runs to meet him and embraces him. The child sees in his father the two dimensions of love-- the sacrifice of the day’s hard work and the joy of bringing home sustenance for the family.

Where there is sacrifice, there is also joy; where there is love, there is also pain. These are the two dimensions of our Founder’s passiological love-- “*The Passion of Jesus is a sea of pain and a sea of love*”. Two dimensions that cannot be separated in community life.

A community that lives in service and joy is a “community that attracts, a vocational community”, because “*The secret is not running after butterflies; the secret is cultivating a garden so that butterflies will come.*” (Mario Quintana)

### **What is my understanding of community?**

#### **Do we still need “vocation recruiters”?**