

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

INTRODUCTION

Starting with the certainty of the “golden rule”, that all vocations’ ministry was and continues to be: “Come and see” (Jn 1, 39), it is essential to emphasise fraternal life in community, i.e., good inter-personal relations in which friendship, sincerity and maturity are valued as basic human qualities in order to live well together, combined with a faith dimension, because it is the Lord who calls – to a simpler and welcoming lifestyle, with dialogue and participation. (Puebla, conclusions 730).

Young people today are more interested in the witness of people’s lives than in their declarations of good intentions. They demand signs that make the consistency of their lives transparent. Their own need for security makes it indispensable, when taking a decision of this kind, for them to be attracted by the fraternal life of others in a way that involves their whole being.

The soil necessary for a vocation to grow and prosper is undoubtedly an environment where Jesus is followed with joy, conviction and hope. A climate of this sort is attractive and arouses the desire to share in that same life. These processes should point to a path that will lead the whole person to opt freely for the Lord who is recognised as capable of filling his life to the full. However, to proclaim or affirm this is not enough - experience of community living has to be offered by those who have already had that experience, so that it may be shared.

SYNTHESIS

The subject of this document is the face that “fraternal life in community” presents today, because in many countries there are major changes compared to the past. These changes, as well as the hopes and disappointments that have accompanied the process, call for reflection in the light of Vatican Council II. They have brought to light more than a few evangelical values, giving new vitality to the religious community, but also giving rise to a number of queries due to the fact that some elements typical of fraternal life lived in a community were obscured. In some places it would appear that the religious community has lost its relevance and is no longer an ideal to be followed. With the serenity and urgency of those seeking the will of the Lord, many communities have chosen to value this change, all the better to correspond to their vocation in the people of God.

Many are the factors that have determined the changes, including “the constant return to the sources of Christian life and the original inspiration for the Institutes”. However, this process also took place within other more general changes, which are like their existential context: the values and counter-values of an era or cultural situation and the social structures that reflect them, affect everybody’s lives, including the Church and its religious communities. The latter are either true evangelical ferment in society,

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

proclamation of the Good News in the midst of the world, or else they succumb, in more or less prolonged agony, because they have accommodated to the world.

Nevertheless, the evolution of the Church also exerted a profound influence on religious communities. Vatican Council II, as an occasion of grace and the highest expression of the Church's pastoral talent in this century, had a decisive influence on religious life, not only by virtue of the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, dedicated to her, but also thanks to the conciliar ecclesiology and all the documents thereof.

It is for these reasons that this document quickly goes through the changes that have occurred in areas most likely to have influenced the quality of fraternal life and the different way of living it in the various religious communities. It is most important to run through the theological and canonical developments and, of course, the development of new societies. To acknowledge that these changes have had a profound impact on religious communities means mentioning the new configuration of religious communities, the growing demands to respond to, society's new needs, and the new way of understanding and living one's work in a secularised context. Another aspect is the new concept of the person, in which the value of each individual is recovered, to be considered in conjunction with the new government structures that emerge from the renewed Constitutions. All the changes and tendencies that we have just described have deeply affected the physiognomy of religious communities, but in different ways.

The sometimes very notable differences depend, as is understandable, on different cultures and different continents, whether the communities are masculine or feminine, the type of religious life and the Institute, the kind of activity and commitment to re-read and update the Founder's charism, the way of relating to society and the Church, the way of accepting the values proposed by the Council, the different traditions and forms of community life, the different methods of exercising authority and promoting renewal of ongoing formation.

In the light of these new situations, this document seeks to encourage the efforts made by many religious communities to improve the quality of their fraternal life. In addition this document would like to offer motives for reflection for those who have drifted away from the communitarian ideal, so that they may take seriously the fact that fraternal life in community is essential for anyone who has consecrated himself to the Lord in a religious institute or has joined a society of apostolic life. With this end in mind, we set out themes such as: the religious community as a gift, the religious community as a place where we can become brothers, the religious community as a place and subject for mission. Let us not forget that in order to enter into the mystery of communion and brotherhood, and before undertaking the difficult and necessary discernment to achieve a renewed evangelical splendour of our communities, it is necessary humbly to invoke the Holy Spirit to bring about that which only He is able to do: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh . . . and you shall be my people, and I will be your God" (Ez 36, 26 – 28)

As expression of the Church, the religious community is the fruit of the Spirit and participation in Trinitarian communion. From this comes the commitment of each and every religious to feel co-responsible for fraternal life in community, so as to make his belonging to Christ clear and manifest, and, in the case of the Hospitaller, to choose and call brothers and sisters to live the charism and spirituality of St John of God together in His name.

CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE

FRATERNAL LIFE IN COMMUNITY

"Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor"

II. RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY AS PLACE FOR BECOMING BROTHERS AND SISTERS

11. From the gift of communion arises the duty to build fraternity, in other words, to become brothers and sisters in a given community where all are called to live together. From accepting with wonder and gratitude the reality of divine communion shared with mere creatures, there also arises conviction of the need to make it always more visible by building communities "filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:52).

In our days, and for our days, it is necessary to take up again this "divine-human" work of building up the community of brothers and sisters, keeping in mind the specific circumstances of present times in which theological, canonical, social and structural developments have profoundly affected the profile and life of religious community.

Starting from a number of specific situations, the present document wishes to offer indications for strengthening commitment to a continued evangelical renewal of communities.

Spirituality and common prayer

12. In its primary mystical component, every authentic Christian community is seen in "itself a theological reality, an object of contemplation".(28) It follows that a religious community is, above all else, a mystery which must be contemplated and welcomed with a heart full of gratitude in the clear context of faith.

Whenever we lose sight of this mystical and theological dimension which binds religious community to the mystery of divine communion, present and communicated to the community, we inevitably come to forget the profound reasons for "making community", for patiently building fraternal life. This life can sometimes seem beyond human strength and a useless waste of energy, especially to those intensely committed to action and conditioned by an activist and individualistic culture.

The same Christ who called them, daily calls together his brothers and sisters to speak with them and to unite them to himself and to each other in the Eucharist, to assimilate them increasingly into His living and visible Body, in whom the Spirit lives, on journey towards the Father.

Prayer in common, which has always been considered the foundation of all community life, starts from contemplation of God's great and sublime mystery, from wonder for his presence, which is at work in the most significant moments of the life of our religious families as well as in the humble and ordinary realities of our communities.

13. As a response to the admonition of the Lord, "watch at all times, and pray" (cf. Lk. 21:36), a religious community needs to be watchful and take the time necessary for attending to the quality of its life. Sometimes men and women religious "don't have time" and their day runs the risk of being too busy and

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

anxious, and the religious can end up being tired and exhausted. In fact, religious community is regulated by a rhythmic horarium to give determined times to prayer, and especially so that one can learn to give time to God (*vacare Deo*).

Prayer needs to be seen also as time for being with the Lord so that He might act in us and, notwithstanding distractions and weariness, might enter our lives, console them and guide them. So that, in the end, our entire existence can belong to him.

14. One of the most valuable achievements of recent decades, recognised and blessed by all, has been the rediscovery of liturgical prayer by religious families.

Communal celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, or at least of some part of it, has revitalised prayer in many communities, which have been brought into more lively contact with the word of God and the prayer of the Church.(29)

Thus, all must remain strongly convinced that community is built up starting from the liturgy, especially from celebration of the Eucharist(30) and the other sacraments. Among these other sacraments, renewed attention should be given to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, through which the Lord restores union with Himself and with one's brothers and sisters.

As happened in the first community in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 2:42), the word, the Eucharist, common prayer, dedication and fidelity to the teaching of the Apostles and their successors, put one in touch with God's great works; in this context, these works become resplendent and generate praise, thanksgiving, joy, union of hearts, comfort in the shared difficulties of daily life together, and mutual encouragement in faith.

Unfortunately, the decrease in the number of priests may, here or there, make it impossible to participate daily in the Mass. In these circumstances, we must be concerned to deepen our appreciation of the great gift of the Eucharist and place at the very heart of our lives the Sacred Mystery of the Body and Blood of our Lord, alive and present in the Community to sustain and inspire it in its journey to the Father. From this derives the necessity that every religious house have its own oratory as the centre of the community,(31) where members can nourish their own Eucharistic spirituality by prayer and adoration.

It is around the Eucharist, celebrated or adored, "source and summit" of all activity of the Church, that the communion of souls is built up, which is the starting point of all growth in fraternity. "From this all education for community spirit must begin".(32)

15. Communal prayer reaches its full effectiveness when it is intimately linked to personal prayer. Common prayer and personal prayer are closely related and are complementary to each other. Everywhere, but especially so in some regions and cultures, greater emphasis must be placed on the inner aspect, on the filial relationship to the Father, on the intimate and spousal relationship with Christ, on the personal deepening of what is celebrated and lived in community prayer, on the interior and exterior silence that leaves space for the Word and the Spirit to regenerate the more hidden depths. The consecrated person who lives in community nourishes his or her consecration both through constant personal dialogue with God and through community praise and intercession.

16. In recent years, community prayer has been enriched by various forms of expression and sharing.

For many communities, the sharing of *Lectio divina* and reflection on the word of God, as well as the sharing of personal faith experiences and apostolic concerns have been particularly fruitful. Differences of age, formation and character make it advisable to be prudent in requiring this of an entire community. It is well to recall that the right moment cannot be rushed.

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

Where it is practised with spontaneity and by common agreement, such sharing nourishes faith and hope as well as mutual respect and trust; it facilitates reconciliation and nourishes fraternal solidarity in prayer.

17. The Lord's injunction to "always pray and not lose heart" (Lk. 18:1; cf. 1 Thes. 5:17) is equally valid for personal prayer and for communal prayer. A religious community lives constantly in the sight of its Lord and ought to be continuously aware of his presence. Nevertheless, prayer in common has its own rhythms whose frequency (daily, weekly, monthly or yearly) is set forth in the proper law of each institute.

Prayer in common which requires fidelity to an horarium also and above all requires perseverance: "that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope..., that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15:4-6).

Faithfulness and perseverance will also help overcome, creatively and wisely, certain difficulties which mark some communities, such as diversity of commitments and consequent differences in schedules, overwork which absorbs one, and various kinds of fatigue.

18. Prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary, animated by a love for her which leads us to imitate her, has the effect that her exemplary and maternal presence becomes a great support in daily fidelity to prayer (cf. Acts 1:14), becoming a bond of communion for the religious community.(33)

The Mother of the Lord will help configure religious communities to the model of "her" family, the Family of Nazareth, a place which religious communities ought often to visit spiritually, because there the Gospel of communion and fraternity was lived in a wonderful way.

19. Common prayer also sustains and nourishes apostolic impulse. On the one hand, prayer is a mysterious transforming power which embraces all realities to redeem and order the world. On the other, it finds its stimulus in the apostolic ministry, in its daily joys and difficulties. These then become an occasion for seeking and discovering the presence and action of the Lord.

20. Religious communities which are most apostolically and evangelically alive -- whether contemplative or active -- are the ones which have a rich experience of prayer. At a time such as ours, when we note a certain reawakening of the search for the transcendent, religious communities can become privileged places where the various paths which lead to God can be experienced.

"As a family united in the Lord's name, [a religious community] is of its nature the place where the experience of God should be able in a special way to come to fullness and be communicated to others", (34) above all to one's own brothers and sisters within the community.

Men and women consecrated to God will fail to meet this historic challenge if they do not respond to the "search for God" in our contemporaries, who, will then perhaps turn to other erroneous paths in an effort to satisfy their thirst for the Absolute.

Personal freedom and the building of fraternity

21. "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). In the entire dynamic of community life, Christ, in his paschal mystery, remains the model of how to construct unity. Indeed, he is the source, the model and the measure of the command of mutual love: we must love one another as he loved us. And he loved us to the point of giving up his life for us. Our life is a sharing in the charity of Christ, in his love for the Father and for his brothers and sisters, a love forgetful of self.

All of this, however, is not in the nature of the "old man", who wants communion and unity but does not want or intend to pay the price in terms of personal commitment and dedication. The path that leads from the "old man", who tends to close in on himself, to the "new man" who gives himself to others is a long and

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

difficult one. The holy founders realistically emphasised the difficulties and dangers of this passage, conscious as they were that community cannot be improvised. It is not a spontaneous thing nor is it achieved in a short time.

In order to live as brothers and sisters, a true journey of interior liberation is necessary. Israel, liberated from Egypt, became the People of God after walking for a long time through the desert under the guidance of Moses. In much the same way, a community inserted within the Church as People of God must be built by persons whom Christ has liberated and made capable of loving as he did, by the gift of his liberating love and the heartfelt acceptance of those he gives us as guides.

The love of Christ poured out in our hearts urges us to love our brothers and sisters even to the point of taking on their weaknesses, their problems and their difficulties. In a word: even to the point of giving our very selves.

22. Christ gives a person two basic certainties: the certainty of being infinitely loved and the certainty of being capable of loving without limits. Nothing except the Cross of Christ can give in a full and definitive way these two certainties and the freedom they bring. Through them, consecrated persons gradually become free from the need to be at the centre of everything and to possess the other, and from the fear of giving themselves to their brothers and sisters. They learn rather to love as Christ loved them, with that love which now is poured forth in their hearts, making them capable of forgetting themselves and giving themselves as the Lord did.

By the power of this love a community is brought to life as a gathering of people who are free, liberated by the Cross of Christ.

23. This path of liberation which leads to full communion and to the freedom of the children of God demands, however, the courage of self-denial in accepting and welcoming the other with his or her limitations, starting with the acceptance of authority.

Many have noted that this has constituted one of the weak points of the recent period of renewal. There has been an increase of knowledge and various aspects of communal life have been studied. Much less attention has been paid, however, to the ascetic commitment which is necessary and irreplaceable for any liberation capable of transforming a group of people into a Christian fraternity.

Communion is a gift offered which also requires a response, a patient learning experience and struggle, in order to overcome the excesses of spontaneity and the fickleness of desires. The highest ideal of community necessarily brings with it conversion from every attitude contrary to communion.

Community that is not mystical has no soul, but community that is not ascetic has no body. "Synergy" between the gift of God and personal commitment is required for building an incarnated communion, for giving, in other words, flesh and concrete existence to grace and to the gift of fraternal communion.

24. It must be admitted that this kind of reasoning presents difficulty today both to young people and to adults. Often, young people come from a culture which overrates subjectivity and the search for self-fulfilment, while adults either are anchored to structures of the past or experience a certain disenchantment with respect to the never-ending assemblies which were prevalent some years ago, a source of verbosity and uncertainty.

If it is true that communion does not exist without the self-offering of each member, then it is necessary, right from the beginning, to remove the illusion that everything must come from others, and to help each one discover with gratitude all that has already been received, and is in fact being received from others. Right from the beginning, it is necessary to prepare to be not only consumers of community, but above all

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

its builders; to be responsible for each other's growth; to be open and available to receive the gift of the other; to be able to help and to be helped; to replace and to be replaced.

A fraternal and shared common life has a natural attraction for young people but, later, perseverance in the real conditions of life can become a heavy burden. Initial formation needs, then, to bring one to awareness of the sacrifices required for living in community, to accepting them in view of a joyful and truly fraternal relationship and of all the other attitudes characteristic of one who is interiorly free.(35) When we lose ourselves for our brothers and sisters, then we find ourselves.

25. It must always be remembered that, for religious men and women, fulfilment comes through their communities. One who tries to live an independent life, detached from community, has surely not taken the secure path to the perfection of his or her own state.

Whereas western society applauds the independent person, the one who can attain self-actualisation alone, the self-assured individualist, the Gospel requires persons who, like the grain of wheat, know how to die to themselves so that fraternal life may be born.(36)

Thus community becomes "Schola Amoris," a School of Love, for young people and for adults -- a school in which all learn to love God, to love the brothers and sisters with whom they live, and to love humanity, which is in great need of God's mercy and of fraternal solidarity.

26. The communitarian ideal must not blind us to the fact that every Christian reality is built on human frailty. The perfect "ideal community" does not exist yet: the perfect communion of the saints is our goal in the heavenly Jerusalem.

Ours is the time for edification and constant building. It is always possible to improve and to walk together towards a community that is able to live in forgiveness and love. Communities cannot avoid all conflicts. The unity which they must build is a unity established at the price of reconciliation.(37) Imperfection in communities ought not discourage us.

Every day, communities take up again their journey, sustained by the teaching of the Apostles: "love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honour" (Rom. 12:10); "live in harmony with one another" (Rom. 12:16); "welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you" (Rom. 15:7); "I myself am satisfied... that you are... able to instruct one another" (Rom. 15:14); "wait for one another" (1 Cor. 11:33); "through love, be servants of one another" (Gal. 5:13); "encourage one another" (1 Thes. 5:11); "forbearing one another in love" (Eph. 4:2); "be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another" (Eph. 4:32); "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21); "pray for one another" (James 5:16); "clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility towards one another" (1 Pet. 5:5); "we have fellowship with one another" (1 Jn. 1:7); "let us not grow weary in well-doing..., especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:9-10).

27. It may be useful to recall that in order to foster communion of minds and hearts among those called to live together in a community, it is necessary to cultivate those qualities which are required in all human relationships: respect, kindness, sincerity, self-control, tactfulness, a sense of humour and a spirit of sharing.

Recent documents from the Magisterium are rich with suggestions and indications helpful for community living such as joyful simplicity,(38) clarity and mutual trust,(39) capacity for dialogue,(40) and sincere acceptance of a beneficial communitarian discipline.(41)

28. We must not forget, in the end, that peace and pleasure in being together are among the signs of the Kingdom of God. The joy of living even in the midst of difficulties along the human and spiritual path and in

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

the midst of daily annoyances is already part of the Kingdom. This joy is a fruit of the Spirit and embraces the simplicity of existence and the monotonous texture of daily life. A joyless fraternity is one that is dying out; before long, members will be tempted to seek elsewhere what they can no longer find within their own home. A fraternity rich in joy is a genuine gift from above to brothers and sisters who know how to ask for it and to accept one another, committing themselves to fraternal life, trusting in the action of the Spirit. Thus the words of the Psalm are made true: "Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.... For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life for evermore" (Ps. 133:1-3), "because when they live together as brothers, they are united in the assembly of the Church; they are of one heart in charity and of one will".(42)

Such a testimony of joy is a powerful attraction to religious life, a source of new vocations and an encouragement to perseverance. It is very important to cultivate such joy within a religious community: overwork can destroy it, excessive zeal for certain causes can lead some to forget it, constant self-analysis of one's identity and one's own future can cloud it.

Being able to enjoy one another; allowing time for personal and communal relaxation; taking time off from work now and then; rejoicing in the joys of one's brothers and sisters, in solicitous concern for the needs of brothers and sisters; trusting commitment to works of the apostolate; compassion in dealing with situations; looking forward to the next day with the hope of meeting the Lord always and everywhere: these are things that nourish serenity, peace and joy. They become strength in apostolic action.

Joy is a splendid testimony to the evangelical quality of a religious community; it is the end point of a journey which is not lacking in difficulties, but which is possible because it is sustained by prayer: "rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer" (Rom. 12:12).

Communicating in order to grow together

29. In the renewal of recent years, communication has been recognised as one of the human factors acquiring increased importance for the life of a religious community. The deeply felt need to enhance fraternal life in community is accompanied by a corresponding need for communication which is both fuller and more intense.

In order to become brothers and sisters, it is necessary to know one another. To do this, it is rather important to communicate more extensively and more deeply. Today, more attention is given to various aspects of communication, although the form and the degree may vary from one institute to another, and from one region to the next.

30. Communication within institutes has developed considerably. There is a growing number of regular meetings of members at different levels, central, regional, and provincial; superiors often send letters and suggestions, and their visits to communities are more frequent. The publication of newsletters and internal periodicals is more widespread.

This kind of broad communication asked for at various levels, corresponding to the character proper to the institute, normally creates closer relations, nourishes a family spirit and sharing in the concerns of the entire institute, creates greater sensitivity to general problems, and brings religious closer together around their common mission.

31. Regular meetings at the community level, often on a weekly basis, have also proved very useful; they let members share problems concerning the community, the institute, the Church, and in relation to the Church's major documents. They provide opportunities to listen to others, share one's own thoughts, review and evaluate past experiences, and think and plan together.

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

Such meetings are particularly necessary for the growth and development of fraternal life, especially in larger communities. Time must be set aside for this purpose and kept free from all other engagements. In addition to concern for community life, these meetings are also important for fostering co-responsibility and for situating one's own work within the broader framework of religious life, Church life and the life of the world to which we are sent in mission. This is an avenue which must be pursued in every community, adapting its rhythms and approaches to the size of the community and to the members' commitments. In contemplative communities, it should respect their own style of life.

32. But there is more. In many places, there is a felt need for more intense communication among religious living together in the same community. The lack of or weakness in communication usually leads to weakening of fraternity: if we know little or nothing about the lives of our brothers or sisters, they will be strangers to us, and the relationship will become anonymous, as well as create true and very real problems of isolation and solitude. Some communities complain about the poor quality of the fundamental sharing of spiritual goods. Communication takes place, they say, around problems and issues of marginal importance but rarely is there any sharing of what is vital and central to the journey of consecration.

This can have painful consequences, because then spiritual experience imperceptibly takes on individualistic overtones. A mentality of self-sufficiency becomes more important; a lack of sensitivity to others develops; and, gradually, significant relationships are sought outside the community.

This problem should be dealt with explicitly. It requires, on the one hand, a tactful and caring approach which does not exert pressure; but it also requires courage and creativity, searching for ways and methods which will make it possible for all to learn to share, simply and fraternally, the gifts of the Spirit so that these may indeed belong to all and be of benefit to all (cf. 1 Cor. 12:7).

Communion originates precisely in sharing the Spirit's gifts, a sharing of faith and in faith, where the more we share those things which are central and vital, the more the fraternal bond grows in strength. This kind of communication can also be helpful as a way of learning a style of sharing which will enable members, in their own apostolates, to "confess their faith" in simple and easy terms which all may understand and appreciate.

There are many ways in which spiritual gifts can be shared and communicated. Besides the ones already mentioned (sharing the word and the experience of God, communal discernment, community projects),(43) we should recall fraternal correction, review of life, and other forms characteristic of the tradition. These are concrete ways of putting at the service of others and of pouring into the community the gifts which the Spirit gives so abundantly for its upbuilding and for its mission in the world.

All of this takes on greater importance now since communities often include religious of different ages and different races, members with different cultural and theological formation, religious who have had widely differing experiences during these agitated and pluralistic years.

Without dialogue and attentive listening, community members run the risk of living juxtaposed or parallel lives, a far cry from the ideal of fraternity.

33. Every kind of communication implies itineraries and particular psychological difficulties which can also be addressed positively with the help of the human sciences. Some communities have benefited, for example, from the help of experts in communication and professionals in the fields of psychology or sociology.

These are exceptional measures which need to be evaluated prudently, and they can be used with moderation by communities wishing to break down the walls of separation which at times are raised within

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

a community. These human techniques are useful, but they are not sufficient. All must have at heart the welfare of their brothers and sisters, cultivating an evangelical ability to receive from others all that they might wish to give and to communicate, and all that they in fact communicate by their very existence.

Be "of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.... In humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others". Your mutual relations should be founded on the fact that you are united to Christ Jesus (cf. Phil. 2:2-5).

In a climate such as this, various techniques and approaches to communication compatible with religious life can enhance the growth of fraternity.

34. The considerable impact of mass media on modern life and mentality has its effect on religious communities as well, and frequently affects internal communication.

A community, aware of the influence of the media, should learn to use them for personal and community growth, with the evangelical clarity and inner freedom of those who have learned to know Christ (cf. Gal. 4:17-23). The media propose, and often impose, a mentality and model of life in constant contrast with the Gospel. In this connection, in many areas one hears of the desire for deeper formation in receiving and using the media, both critically and fruitfully. Why not make them an object of evaluation, of discernment and of planning in the regular community meetings?

In particular when television becomes the only form of recreation, relations among people are blocked or even impeded, fraternal communication is limited and indeed consecrated life itself can be damaged.

A proper balance is needed: the moderate and prudent use of the communications media,(44) accompanied by community discernment, can help the community know better the complexity of the world of culture, receive the media with awareness and a critical eye and, finally, evaluate their impact in relation to the various ministries at the service of the Gospel.

In keeping with the choice of their specific state of life, characterised by a more marked separation from the world, contemplative communities should consider themselves more committed to preserving an atmosphere of recollection, being guided by the norms determined in their own constitutions about the use of the communications media.

Religious community and personal growth

35. Because religious community is a Schola Amoris which helps one grow in love for God and for one's brothers and sisters, it is also a place for human growth. The path is a demanding one, since it requires the renunciation of goods that are certainly highly valued,(45) but it is not impossible. A multitude of men and women saints and the wonderful figures of religious men and women are there to prove that consecration to Christ "does not constitute an obstacle to the true development of the human person but by its nature is supremely beneficial to that development".(46)

The path towards human maturity, which is a prerequisite of a radiant evangelical life, is a process which knows no limits, since it involves continuous enrichment not only of spiritual values but also of values in the psychological, cultural and social order.(47)

In recent years, major changes in culture and custom have been oriented, in practice, more towards material realities than towards spiritual values. This makes it necessary to pay attention to some areas where, today, persons appear to be particularly vulnerable.

36. Identity

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

The process of maturing takes place through one's own identifying with the call of God. A weak sense of identity can lead to a misconceived idea of self-actualisation, especially in times of difficulty, with an excessive need for positive results and approval from others, an exaggerated fear of inadequacy, and depression brought on by failure.

The identity of a consecrated person depends on spiritual maturity; this is brought about by the Spirit who prompts us to be conformed to Christ, according to the particular characteristic provided by "the founding gift which mediates the Gospel to the members of a given religious institute".(48) For this reason, the help of a spiritual guide, who knows well and respects the spirituality and mission of the institute, is most important. Such a one will "discern the action of God, accompany the religious in the ways of God, nourish life with solid doctrine and the practice of prayer".(49) This accompaniment is particularly necessary in the initial stage of formation, but it is useful throughout life, in order to foster "growth towards the fullness of Christ".

Cultural maturity also helps one face the challenges of mission by acquiring the tools necessary for discerning future trends and working out appropriate responses, in which the Gospel is continuously proposed as the alternative to worldly proposals, integrating its positive forces and purifying them of the leaven of evil.

In this dynamic, the consecrated person and the religious community are a proposal of the Gospel, a proposal which manifests the presence of Christ in the world.(50)

37. Affectivity

Fraternal life in common requires from all members good psychological balance within which each individual can achieve emotional maturity. As mentioned above, one essential element of such growth is emotional freedom, which enables consecrated persons to love their vocation and to love in accordance with this vocation. It is precisely this freedom and this maturity which allow us to live out our affectivity correctly, both inside and outside the community.

To love one's vocation, to hear the call as something that gives true meaning to life, and to cherish consecration as a true, beautiful and good reality which gives truth, beauty and goodness to one's own existence -- all of this makes a person strong and autonomous, secure in one's own identity, free of the need for various forms of support and compensation, especially in the area of affectivity. All this reinforces the bond that links the consecrated person to those who share his or her calling. It is with them, first and foremost, that he or she feels called to live relationships of fraternity and friendship.

To love one's vocation is to love the Church, it is to love one's institute, and to experience the community as one's own family.

To love in accordance with one's vocation is to love in the manner of one who, in every human relationship, wishes to be a clear sign of the love of God, not invading and not possessing, but loving and desiring the good of the other with God's own benevolence.

Therefore, special formation is required in the area of affectivity to promote an integration of the human aspect with the more specifically spiritual aspect. In this respect, the guidelines contained in *Potissimum Institutioni*(51) concerning discernment of "a balanced affectivity, especially sexual balance" and "the ability to live in community" are particularly relevant.

However, difficulties in this area are frequently echoes of problems originating in other areas: affectivity and sexuality marked by a narcissistic and adolescent attitude, or by rigid repression, can sometimes be a result of negative experiences prior to entering the community, but they can also be a result of difficulties

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

in community or apostolate. A rich and warm fraternal life, one that "carries the burden" of the wounded brother or sister in need of help, is thus particularly important.

While a certain maturity is necessary for life in community, a cordial fraternal life is equally necessary in order to allow each religious to attain maturity. Where members of a community become aware of diminished affective autonomy in one of their brothers or sisters, the response on the part of the community ought to be one of rich and human love, similar to that of our Lord Jesus and of many holy religious -- a love that shares in fears and joys, difficulties and hopes, with that warmth that is particular to a new heart that knows how to accept the whole person. Such love -- caring and respectful, gratuitous rather than possessive -- should make the love of Our Lord seem very near: that love which caused the Son of God to proclaim through the Cross that we cannot doubt that we are loved by Love.

38. Difficulties

A special occasion for human growth and Christian maturity lies in living with persons who suffer, who are not at ease in community, and who thus are an occasion of suffering for others and of disturbance in community life.

We must first of all ask about the source of such suffering. It may be caused by a character defect, commitments that seem too burdensome, serious gaps in formation, excessively rapid changes over recent years, excessively authoritarian forms of government, or by spiritual difficulties.

There may be some situations when the one in authority needs to remind members that life in common sometimes requires sacrifice and can become a form of maxima poenitentia, grave penance.

In some cases recourse to the social sciences is necessary, in particular where individuals are clearly incapable of living community life due to problems of insufficient maturity and psychological weakness, or due to factors which are more pathological.

Recourse to such intervention has proved useful not only at the therapeutic stage -- in cases of more or less evident psycho-pathology -- but also as a preventive measure, to assist in the proper selection of candidates, and to assist formation teams in some cases to address specific pedagogical and formative problems.(52)

In all cases, in choosing specialists, preference is to be given to those who are believers and are well experienced with religious life and its dynamics. So much the better if these specialists are themselves consecrated men or women.

Finally, the use of such methods will be truly effective only if it is applied exceptionally and not generalised; this is so partly because psycho-pedagogical measures do not solve all problems and thus "cannot substitute for an authentic spiritual direction".(53)

From me to us

39. Respect for the human person, recommended by the Council and by various succeeding documents,(54) has had a positive influence on the praxis of communities. Simultaneously, however, individualism has spread, with greater or lesser intensity depending on the regions of the world, and in various forms: the need to take centre stage; an exaggerated insistence on personal well-being, whether physical, psychological or professional; a preference for individual work or for prestigious and "signed" work; the absolute priority of one's personal aspirations and one's own individual path, regardless of others and with no reference to the community.

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

On the other hand, we must continue to seek a just balance, not always easy to achieve, between the common good and respect for the human person, between the demands and needs of individuals and those of the community, between personal charisms and the community's apostolate. And this should be far from both the disintegrating forces of individualism and the levelling aspects of communitarianism. Religious community is the place where the daily and patient passage from "me" to "us" takes place, from my commitment to a commitment entrusted to the community, from seeking "my things" to seeking "the things of Christ".

In this way, religious community becomes the place where we learn daily to take on that new mind which allows us to live in fraternal communion through the richness of diverse gifts and which, at the same time, fosters a convergence of these gifts towards fraternity and towards co-responsibility in the apostolic plan.

40. In order to realise such a community and apostolic "symphony", it is necessary:

a) to celebrate and give thanks together for the common gift of vocation and mission, a gift far surpassing every individual and cultural difference; to promote a contemplative attitude with regard to the wisdom of God, who has sent specific brothers and sisters to the community that each may be a gift to the other; to praise him for what each brother or sister communicates from the presence and word of Christ;

b) to cultivate mutual respect by which we accept the slow journey of weaker members without stifling the growth of richer personalities; a respect which fosters creativity but also calls for responsibility to others and to solidarity;

c) to focus on a common mission: each institute has its own mission, to which all must contribute according to their particular gifts. The road of consecrated men and women consists precisely in progressively consecrating to the Lord all that they have, and all that they are, for the mission of their religious family;

d) to recall that the apostolic mission is entrusted in the first place to the community and that this often entails conducting works proper to the institute. Dedication to this kind of community apostolate helps a consecrated person mature and grow in his or her particular way of holiness;

e) to consider that religious, on receiving in obedience personal missions, ought to consider themselves sent by the community. For its part, the community shall see to their regular updating and include them in the reviews of apostolic and community commitments.

During the time of formation, all good will notwithstanding, it may prove impossible to integrate the personal gifts of a consecrated individual within fraternity and a common mission. It may be necessary in such cases to ask, "Do God's gifts in this person... make for unity and deepen communion? If they do, they can be welcomed. If they do not, then no matter how good the gifts may seem to be in themselves, or how desirable they may appear to some members, they are not for this particular institute.... It is not wise to tolerate widely divergent lines of development which do not have a strong foundation of unity in the institute itself".(55)

41. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of small communities, especially for reasons of apostolate. These communities can also foster closer relations among religious, prayer which is more deeply shared, and a reciprocal and more fraternal taking up of responsibility.(56)

But there are some motives which are questionable, such as sameness of tastes or of mentality. In this situation, it is easy for a community to close in on itself and come to the point of choosing its own members, and brothers or sisters sent by the superiors may or may not be accepted. This is contrary to the very nature of religious community and to its function as sign. Optional homogeneity, besides weakening

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

apostolic mobility, weakens the Pneumatic strength of a community and robs the spiritual reality which rules the community of its power as witness.

The effort involved in mutual acceptance and commitment to overcoming difficulties, characteristics of heterogeneous communities, show forth the transcendence of the reason which brought the community into existence, that is, the power of God which "is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

We stay together in community not because we have chosen one another, but because we have been chosen by the Lord.

42. Whereas culture of a western stamp can lead to individualism which makes fraternal life in common difficult, other cultures can lead to communitarianism which makes giving proper recognition to the human person difficult. All cultural forms need evangelization.

The presence of religious communities -- which, through a process of conversion, enter into a fraternal life where individuals make themselves available to their brothers or sisters, and where the "group" enhances the individual -- is a sign of the transforming power of the Gospel and of the coming of the Kingdom of God.

International institutes in which members from different cultures live together can contribute to an exchange of gifts through which the members mutually enrich and correct one other in the common desire to live more and more intensely the Gospel of personal freedom and fraternal communion.

Being a community in permanent formation

43. Community renewal has greatly benefited from permanent formation. Recommended and presented in its basic outline by the document *Potissimum Institutioni*,⁽⁵⁷⁾ permanent formation is considered by all who are responsible for religious institutes as of vital importance for the future.

In spite of some uncertainties (difficulties in integrating its different aspects, difficulties in sensitising all the members of a community, the absorbing demands of apostolic work, and a correct balance between activity and formation), most institutes, at either the central or local level, have undertaken initiatives.

One of the goals of such initiatives is to form communities that are mature, evangelical, fraternal and capable of continuing permanent formation in daily life. Religious community is the place where broad guidelines are implemented concretely, through patient and persevering daily efforts. Religious community is, for everyone, the place and the natural setting of the process of growth, where all become co-responsible for the growth of others. Religious community is also the place where, day by day, members help one another to respond as consecrated persons, bearing a common charism, to the needs of the least and to the challenges of the new society.

Quite frequently, responses to existing problems can differ and this entails obvious consequences for community life. From this arises the realisation that one of the challenges intensely felt today is to integrate members who were given a different formation and have different apostolic visions into one single community life, in such a way that these differences become not so much occasions of conflict as moments of mutual enrichment. In such a diversified and changeable context, the unifying role of those responsible for community becomes ever more important; it is appropriate to provide them with specific support in the area of permanent formation, in light of their task of motivating the fraternal and apostolic life of their communities.

Based on the experience of recent years, two aspects deserve particular attention: the community dimension of the evangelical counsels and the charism.

44. The community dimension of the evangelical counsels

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

Religious profession expresses the gift of self to God and to the Church -- a gift, however, which is lived in the community of a religious family. Religious are not only "called" to an individual personal vocation. Their call is also a "con-vocation" -- they are called with others, with whom they share their daily life.

There is here a convergence of "yeses" to God which unites a number of religious into one single community of life. Consecrated together -- united in the same "yes", united in the Holy Spirit -- religious discover every day that their following of Christ "obedient, poor and chaste", is lived in fraternity, as was the case with the disciples who followed Jesus in his ministry. They are united with Christ, and therefore called to be united among themselves. They are united in the mission to oppose prophetically the idolatry of power, of possession and of pleasure.(58)

Thus, obedience binds together the various wills and unites them in one single fraternal community, endowed with a specific mission to be accomplished within the Church.

Obedience is a "yes" to God's design, by which He has entrusted a particular task to a group of people. It brings with it a bond to the mission, but also to the community which must carry out its service here and now and together. It also requires a clear-sighted vision of faith regarding the superiors who "fulfil their duty of service and leadership"(59) and who are to see that there is conformity between apostolic work and the mission. It is in communion with them that the divine will -- the only will which can save -- must be fulfilled.

Poverty, the sharing of goods, even spiritual goods, has been from the beginning the basis of fraternal communion. The poverty of individual members, which brings with it a simple and austere life-style, not only frees them from the concerns inherent in private ownership but it also enriches the community, enabling it to serve God and the poor more effectively.

Poverty includes an economic dimension: the possibility of disposing of money as if it were one's own, either for oneself or for members of one's family, a life-style too different from that of fellow community members and from the poverty level of the society within which one is living -- these things injure and weaken fraternal life.

"Poverty of spirit", humility, simplicity, recognising the gifts of others, appreciating evangelical realities such as "the hidden life with Christ in God," respect for the hidden sacrifice, giving value to the least ones, dedication to efforts that are neither recognised nor paid -- these are all unitive aspects of fraternal life and spring from the poverty professed.

A community of "poor" people is better able to show solidarity with the poor and to point to the very heart of evangelization because it concretely presents the transforming power of the beatitudes.

In the community dimension, consecrated chastity, which also implies great purity of mind, heart and body, expresses a great freedom for loving God and all that is his, with an undivided love and thus with a total availability for loving and serving all others, making present the love of Christ. This love, neither selfish nor exclusive, neither possessive nor enslaved to passion, but universal and disinterested, free and freeing, so necessary for mission, is cultivated and grows through fraternal life. Thus, those who live consecrated celibacy "recall that wonderful marriage made by God, which will be fully manifested in the future age, and in which the Church has Christ for her only spouse".(60)

This communal dimension of the vows must be continuously fostered and deepened -- a process which is characteristic of permanent formation.

45. The charism

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

This is the second aspect of permanent formation to which we must give special attention in order to promote the growth of fraternal life.

"Religious consecration establishes a particular communion between religious and God and, in him, between the members of the same institute.... The foundation of unity, however, is the communion in Christ established by the one founding gift."(61) Reference to the institute's founder and to the charism lived by him or her and then communicated, kept and developed throughout the life of the institute,(62) thus appears as an essential element for the unity of the community.

To live in community is to live the will of God together, in accordance with the orientation of the charismatic gift received by the founder from God and transmitted to his or her disciples and followers.

The renewal of recent years, re-emphasising the importance of the originating charism by rich theological reflection,(63) has promoted the unity of the community, which is seen as bearer of this same gift from the Spirit, a gift to be shared with the brothers or sisters, and by which it is possible to enrich the Church "for the life of the world." For this reason, formation programmes which include regular courses of study and prayerful reflection on the founder, the charism and the constitutions of the institute are particularly beneficial.

A deepened understanding of the charism leads to a clearer vision of one's own identity, around which it is easier to build unity and communion. Clarity concerning one's own charismatic identity allows creative adjustment to new situations and this leads to positive prospects for the future of the institute.

A lack of clarity in this area can easily cause insecurity concerning goals and vulnerability with respect to conditions surrounding religious life, cultural currents and various apostolic needs, in addition to the obstacles it raises regarding adaptation and renewal.

46. It is therefore necessary to promote an institute's charismatic identity, especially to avoid a kind of genericism, which is a true threat to the vitality of a religious community.

Several factors have been identified as having caused suffering for religious communities in recent years and, in some cases, continue to cause it:

- - a "generic" approach -- in other words, one that lacks the specific mediation of one's own charism -- in considering certain guidelines of the particular Church or certain suggestions deriving from different spiritualities;
- - a certain kind of involvement in ecclesial movements which exposes individual religious to the ambiguous phenomenon of "dual membership;"
- - in the essential and often fruitful relationships with laity, especially with lay collaborators, a certain adjustment to a lay mentality. Instead of offering their own religious witness as a fraternal gift which would encourage Christian authenticity, they simply imitate the laity, taking on their way of seeing and acting, thus weakening the contribution of their own consecration;
- - an excessive accommodation to the demands of family, to the ideals of nation, race or tribe, or of some social group, which risks distorting the charism to suit particular positions or interests.

The genericism which reduces religious life to a colourless lowest common denominator leads to wiping out the beauty and fruitfulness of the many and various charisms inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Authority in the service of fraternity

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

47. It is generally agreed that the evolution of recent years has contributed to the maturity of fraternal life in communities. In many communities, the climate of life in common has improved: there is more space for the active participation of all; there has been a move from a common life based too much on observance to a life that is more attentive to individual needs, that is better attended to on the human level. The effort to build communities that are less formalistic, less authoritarian, more fraternal and participatory, is generally considered to be one of the more visible fruits of these recent years.

48. These positive developments in some places have risked being compromised by a distrust of authority.

The desire for deeper communion among the members and an understandable reaction against structures felt as being too rigid and authoritarian have contributed to a lack of understanding of the full scope of the role of authority; indeed, some consider it to be altogether unnecessary to community life, and others have reduced it to the simple role of co-ordinating the initiatives of the members. As a result, a certain number of communities have been led to live with no one in charge while other communities make all decisions collegially. All of this brings with it the danger, not merely hypothetical, of a complete breakdown of community life; it tends to give priority to individual paths, and simultaneously to blur the function of authority -- a function which is both necessary for the growth of fraternal life in community and for the spiritual journey of the consecrated person.

However, the results of these experiments are gradually leading back to the rediscovery of the need for and the role of personal authority, in continuity with the entire tradition of religious life.

If the widespread democratic climate has encouraged the growth of co-responsibility and of participation by all in the decision-making process, even within the religious community, nevertheless, we must not forget that fraternity is not only a fruit of human effort but also and above all a gift of God. It is a gift that comes from obedience to the Word of God, and also, in religious life, to the authority who reminds us of that Word and relates it to specific situations, in accordance with the spirit of the institute.

"But we beseech you, brothers, to respect those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work" (1 Thes. 5:12-13). The Christian community is not an anonymous collective, but it is endowed, from the beginning, with leaders, for whom the Apostle asks consideration, respect and charity.

In religious communities, authority, to whom attention and respect are due also by reason of the obedience professed, is placed at the service of the fraternity, of its being built up, of the achievement of its spiritual and apostolic goals.

49. The recent renewal has helped to redesign authority with the intention of linking it once again more closely to its evangelical roots and thus to the service of the spiritual progress of each one and the building up of fraternal life in community.

Every community has a mission of its own to accomplish. Persons in authority thus serve a community which must accomplish a specific mission, received and defined by the institute and by its charism. Since there is a variety of missions, there must also be a variety of kinds of communities, and thus a variety of ways of exercising authority. It is for this reason that religious life has within it various ways of conceiving and exercising authority, defined by proper law.

Authority is, evangelically, always service.

50. The renewal of recent years has led to highlighting some aspects of authority.

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

a) Spiritual authority

If consecrated persons have dedicated themselves to the total service of God, authority promotes and sustains their consecration. In a certain sense, authority can be seen as "servant of the servants of God". Authority has as its main task building in unity the brothers and sisters of "a fraternal community, in which God is sought and loved above all".(64) A superior must therefore be, above all, a spiritual person, convinced of the primacy of the spiritual, both with respect to personal life and for the development of fraternal life; in other words, he or she must know that the more the love of God increases in each individual heart, the more unity there will be between hearts.

Thus, the superior's main task will be the spiritual, community and apostolic animation of his or her community.

b) Authority conducive to unity

An authority conducive to unity is one concerned to create a climate favourable to sharing and co-responsibility; to encourage all to contribute to the affairs of all; to encourage members to assume and to respect responsibility; to promote, by their respect for the human person, voluntary obedience;(65) to listen willingly to the members, promoting their harmonious collaboration for the good of the institute and the Church;(66) to engage in dialogue and offer timely opportunities for encounter; to give courage and hope in times of difficulty; to look ahead and point to new horizons for mission. Still more: an authority which seeks to maintain a balance among the various aspects of community life -- between prayer and work, apostolate and formation, work and rest.

The authority of a superior works so that the religious house is not merely a place of residence, a collection of subjects each of whom lives an individual history, but a "fraternal community in Christ".(67)

c) Authority capable of making final decisions and assuring their implementation

Community discernment is a rather useful process, even if not easy or automatic, for involving human competence, spiritual wisdom and personal detachment. Where it is practised with faith and seriousness, it can provide superiors with optimal conditions for making necessary decisions in the best interests of fraternal life and of mission.

When a decision has been made in accordance with the procedures established by proper law, superiors need perseverance and strength to ensure that what has been decided not remain mere words on paper.

51. It is also necessary that the proper law of each institute be as precise as possible in determining the respective competence of the community, the various councils, departmental co-ordinators and the superior. A lack of clarity in this area is a source of confusion and conflict.

"Community projects", which can help increase participation in community life and in its mission in various contexts, should also take care to define clearly the role and competence of authority, in line with the constitutions.

52. Fraternal and united communities are increasingly called to be an important and eloquent element of the Gospel counter-culture, salt of the earth and light of the world.

Thus, for example, if in western society where individualism is rampant, a religious community is called to be a prophetic sign of the possibility of achieving in Christ fraternity and solidarity, in cultures where authoritarianism or communitarianism is rampant it is called to be a sign of respect for and promotion of the human person, and also an exercise of authority in agreement with the will of God.

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

While religious communities must take on the culture of their place, they are also called to purify and elevate it, through the salt and light of the Gospel, offering through their existing communities a concrete synthesis of what is not only an evangelization of culture but also an evangelising inculturation and an inculturated evangelization.

53. Finally, we must never forget in this delicate, complex and often painful issue that faith plays a decisive role which allows us to understand the saving mystery of obedience.(68) Just as from the disobedience of one man came the disintegration of the human family and from the obedience of the New Man began its reconstitution (cf. Rom. 5:19), so an obedient attitude will always be an essential force for all family life.

Religious life has always lived from this conviction of faith and is called to live from it also today with courage, so as not to run in vain in search of fraternal relations and so as to be an evangelically relevant reality in the Church and in society.

Fraternity as sign

54. The relationship between fraternal life and apostolic activity, in particular within institutes dedicated to works of the apostolate, has not always been clear and has all too often led to tension, both for the individual and for the community. For some, "building community" is felt as an obstacle to mission, almost a waste of time in matters of secondary importance. All must be reminded that fraternal communion, as such, is already an apostolate; in other words, it contributes directly to the work of evangelization. The sign par excellence left us by Our Lord is that of lived fraternity: "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (cf. Jn. 13:35).

Along with sending them to preach the Gospel to every creature (Mt. 28:19-20), the Lord sent his disciples to live together "so that the world may believe" that Jesus is the one sent by the Father and that we owe him the full assent of faith (Jn. 17:21). The sign of fraternity is then of the greatest importance because it is the sign that points to the divine origin of the Christian message and has the power to open hearts to faith. For this reason, "the effectiveness of religious life depends on the quality of the fraternal life in common".(69)

55. A religious community, if and to the extent that it promotes fraternal life among its members, makes present in a continuous and legible way this "sign" which is needed by the Church, above all in her task of new evangelization.

Also for this reason, the Church takes to heart the fraternal life of religious communities: the more intense their fraternal love, the greater the credibility of the message she proclaims, and the more visible the heart of the mystery of the Church, sacrament of the union of humankind with God, and of its members among themselves.(70) Fraternal life is not the "entirety" of the mission of a religious community, but it is an essential element. Fraternal life is just as important as apostolic life.

The needs of apostolic service cannot therefore be invoked to accept or to justify defective community life. Activities undertaken by religious must be activities of people who live in community and who inform their actions with community spirit by word, action and example.

Particular circumstances, considered later, may require adjustments, but these should not be such as to remove a religious from living the communion and spirit of his or her community.

56. Religious communities, aware of their responsibilities towards the greater fraternity of the Church, also become a sign of the possibility of living Christian fraternity and of the price that must be paid to build any form of fraternal life.

OUR LIFE AS BROTHERS IS A FRATERNAL LIFE

Moreover, in the context of the diverse societies of our planet -- torn as they are by the divisive forces of passion and conflicting interests, yearning for unity but unsure of what path to follow -- the presence of communities where people of different ages, languages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, and which remain united despite the inevitable conflicts and difficulties inherent in common life, is in itself a sign that bears witness to a higher reality and points to higher aspirations.

"Religious communities, who by their life proclaim the joy and the human and supernatural value of Christian fraternity, speak to our society about the transforming power of the Good News".(71)

"And above all these, put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col. 3:14), love as it was taught and lived by Jesus Christ and communicated to us through his Spirit. This love that unites is also the love that leads us to extend to others the experience of communion with God and with each other. In other words, it creates apostles by urging communities on their path of mission, whether this be contemplative, proclamation of the Word or ministries of charity. God wishes to inundate the world with his love; so, fraternal communities become missionaries of this love and concrete signs of its unifying power.

57. The quality of fraternal life has a significant impact on the perseverance of individual religious. Just as the poor quality of fraternal life has been mentioned frequently by many as the reason for leaving religious life, so fraternity lived fully has often been, and still is, a valuable support to the perseverance of many.

Within a truly fraternal community, each member has a sense of co-responsibility for the faithfulness of the others; each one contributes to a serene climate of sharing life, of understanding, and of mutual help; each is attentive to the moments of fatigue, suffering, isolation or lack of motivation in others; each offers support to those who are saddened by difficulties and trials.

Thus, religious communities, in the support they give to the perseverance of their members, also acquire the value of a sign of the abiding fidelity of God, and thus become a support to the faith and fidelity of Christians who are immersed in the events of this world, where the paths of fidelity seem to be less and less known.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1. How are you dealing with the changes and challenges of religious life in today's context?**
- 2. What changes could be made in the life of your community to enable a better sharing of the experiences of God that occur in the mission required by the charism of Hospitality?**