

COMMUNITY LIFE

Before attempting to discuss proposals on Community Life and Community Living we thought it would serve a purpose to clarify our ideas about the very word "community". The secular as well as the religious world employs the word to denote a group, a particular gathering, a segment of the social environment having some common notes. Sisters of Mercy should have a clear picture of the significance of a Mercy community in the Church and world of today. Neither secular institutes nor the laity have a religious community in the sense that ours is a community. Members of many secular institutes take the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience as we do. Community life is something we do not share with them but something we do have in common with other religious institutes designated as such by the Church. Through our community we witness to Christ and the Church. In a sense the Sisters create community for community is the heart of our apostolate.

By His Resurrection Christ established a life-union between man and God through the Paraclete. This community life He predestined for all men. People can live together without forming a community because a true community depends upon communication. To have a community there must be openness to others and to God. Each one must feel responsible for making her community. Sensing my responsibility in this regard, I can't say the critical word, I can't give way to impatience. No matter what occurs I must begin anew each day to work towards a goal which is infinite because the community I am helping to make is a reflection of the Trinity. I must expect the cross to be a daily experience. When all tensions will have passed I shall be experiencing heaven. My mortification must be a positive act to meet and deal with persons as persons in community, to help others as others help me to grow in love. I am obliged to contribute to the union which binds us together in community. The Church needs signs in the temporal order to show the way to the Goal--the Beatific Vision.

The structures in religious life should aid us to be better religious. We study the horarium, recreation, silence, the vows, customs, requests and demands and discuss them freely round the table. The superior might read from the Gospel, paragraphs on charity and the sisters will review these in terms of some aspect of community living. Scripture will provide the background for discussions. There must be charity behind silence. Nothing must exist which interferes with the building up of a community spirit. Silence is no longer observed because of a directive or rule but rather because of a necessity from within. The root cause of deepest communication with God and each other is found in the silence of prayer, reflection, and recollection. Guardini compared the community silence of religious with the community silence in the liturgy. In the Trinity there is just one law, the law of love and this love is the Holy Spirit. In God there is no law forcing from the outside. All force is from within. So we must interiorize, so absorb the spirit of the laws as to live spontaneously from within. Then living laws and rules are transformed into the law of love. Rules must be regulations that can be interiorized; otherwise they will not help us grow to be a community.

There have to be external guidelines but not too many. Again the Gospel directives are available to us. Let us take a look at the evangelical counsels:

1) POVERTY: Poverty must be a poverty of spirit, reliance on the Providence of God, a willingness to share and to do with less ourselves, a seeking of common goals and purposes; a willingness to suffer discomforts, to wait patiently for answers to requests or needs as the poor in our institutes of Mercy have to do, being careful not to impose on others or being too preoccupied with the time problem which often arises from attachment to leisure. This spirit of poverty inspires the dedicated Sister to seek ways and means of reaching out to God's poor by sacrificing some extra comfort such as first class travel; to rejoice in deprivations that come from her annual religious assignments (sometimes deprivations of culture, family - natural and religious, climate to which she is accustomed, food she prefers, and what is often the hardest - acceptance and belongingness in a strange milieu.) By unconcern for all such things the Sister of Mercy gives witness to a Life beyond for she has voluntarily become poor in order to become rich in the love of the Trinity. For her poverty is only a means, love of God and neighbor is the end. She is ever available and disposable to God's will.

2) CHASTITY: Chastity in freeing us from human ties makes us open to others, offers a gift of self in service, sharing inspirations, and understanding positive values. There can be no place for exclusive friendship in a heart that is truly chaste. We are being constantly reminded by theologians that the modern world needs femininity - women who say 'fiat' to God, and like Mary keep secrets in their own hearts; who can give back to the world a sense of unity, of dedication, of consecration, who realize they were made for mercy, love, mediation and thus are signs of the eternal - prophetic of the kingdom of God. Father Galot, S.J.¹ reminds us:

Virginity tends to realize the nuptials of Christ and the Church directly...
Profession attaches the religious to Christ Himself as the Spouse...
Profession is not the order of a sign but that of the reality signified.
It thereby anticipates the future life...

.....
...The fidelity of a chaste heart is interior; numerous acts of charity and obedience...are not visible to Christians outside the cloister, and these acts should not become public...the contribution of the consecrated life to the holiness of the Church enlightens the religious as to his ecclesial responsibility...The existence of a religious makes no sense except within the framework of constructing the Mystical Body of Christ. The activity should be first of all hidden and silent. Witness value follows as the second feature of the religious' contribution to the sanctity of the Church.

¹Jean Galot, S.J., "Why Religious Life?", Review for Religious, XIV, # 4 July 1965, pp. 514, 516.

3) OBEDIENCE: Religious obedience involves a poverty of one's own will; a renouncement of self-determination freely chosen for a lifetime out of love of God. It involves both initiative and acceptance. It is an expression of the paschal mystery. If I have ideas I am obliged to present them to the community but I also must accept the final decision of Higher Superiors because all of this helps form a community. It requires humility to listen and accept and this deepens with respect for the human person. Truth has to be sought for and found, then presented in such a manner that it can be accepted. Personality develops in a live community where wishes and needs are given due consideration. Speaking of a religious vocation, Father Tavad² says:

Its purpose does not lie in perpetuating itself but in service. It preaches the kingdom of God by setting an example of total mutual obedience in the fellowship of one common spirit. It is already on earth the eschatological community, spreading from the center of liturgical action to the periphery of apostolic work.

On the psychological level, I can't have a community unless I love someone; accept self and go out to others. I can't really give except in the atmosphere of love. I must love the other person first even when he is not worthy because God first loved me though so very unworthy. If I do not love others I cannot love God. Apropos of this is St. Augustine's expression to the effect that it is utter stupidity to stand on the feet of Christ so as to reach up to kiss His face.

Father Mehr, O.S.C.³ in his commentary on Community Exercises in Religious Life, concludes that

....the activities of our religious life must reflect the deep fact of our community-being, of our being-with one another, sharing a common destiny, united in the bonds of true love in Christ. For the structure of intersubjectivity is in its fullness, the structure of love. But we must be willing to see the levels and the manifestations of this love dim from time to time.

All he asks of us is that we be "available" and "accessible" to others for in this is true charity displayed. According to Father Mehr, "...if community is to happen, I must give myself, and not simply offer the other some service which I perform... Community exercises are significant only in as far as they involve an encounter with the Thou..."

²George Tavad, "Freedom and Responsibility in the Religious Life", Continuum, Vol. 2, # 4, Winter 1965. St. Xavier College, Chicago, Ill. (575-586) p. 586.

³Aloysius J. Mehr, "Community Exercises in Religious Life", Review for Religious, Vol. XXI, 1962 (301-347) pp. 320, 315-316.

During the discussions of the Schema on Religious Life at Vatican Council II, Augustin Cardinal Bea⁴ urged that

...the inspiration for religious life be drawn from the liturgy and the Bible and also from a missionary and ecumenical spirit. He also stressed the point that religious should realize they are not only members of an institute but also members of the Church, and that while it is necessary for a community to preserve the legacy of its founder or foundress it must also cooperate with other religious institutes to live and think and feel with the Church.

This leads us to comment on our community as a community of worship. We offer Christ together with our sisters. It is my community that helps me to offer Christ each day to His Father. It is the "togetherness" that seals the bonds which give us security. We pray the Office together for those present and also for those who are obliged to be absent--we pray in the name of the Church for the Church. Since the Eucharist is said to represent the acme of all Christian life, the conventual Mass should be the high point of the religious life. Through one Bread, the bond of community is made stronger and deeper. Any revitalization of community living must be initiated at the altar. It is this Bread which makes us what we are: sharers in the communal life of the Triune God in and through the risen Christ. Father Schleck, C.S.C.⁵ holds that

...it is the community of worship that perhaps more than all else shows visibly to the Church, the mission she has received from Christ--to fuse into one, into unity of praise and adoration and love all the members of the Body of the Lord. This she does by uniting their voices together, especially in their common participation at the common table of the Lord each morning.

While stressing community perhaps there may seem to be neglect of the individual. Nothing of the kind is intended. We concur with Brother Austin,⁶ that

...an overemphasis on the communal aspects of life in religion may actually promote incidents of revolt...It is primarily important that the communality of life be seen as a value, something to be sought as an aid to one's personal growth. Signs of revolt are to be expected when the common life is taught or preached as an end in itself.

⁴Ed. Floyd Anderson, Vatican Daybook, Vatican II, Session 3, September 14 - November 21, 1964, N.C.W.C., Washington, D.C. 20005, 1965, p. 256.

⁵Charles A. Schleck, C.S.C., "The Common Life", Lectures to Major Superiors of Women, 1962.

⁶Brother Austin Dondero, F.S.C., No Borrowed Light, Bruce Publishing Co., 1965, p. 28.

In planning how best to build community, consideration must always be given to individual temperaments, talents, health, etc. There have to be free times on every formal schedule to care for individual needs and differences. Some are more social than others; some more reserved by nature. Not all express gratitude in similar terms but all who have cultivated social standards know how to show appreciation. Unfortunately at times it can happen that sisters will never forget to acknowledge kindnesses or gifts received from outsiders but take for granted what has been given them in community. This will not happen where all are united in making their community a reflection of the Trinitarian community for the purpose of mutual assistance and love. Words of appreciation are symbolic of the divine-human encounter.

In our study, therefore, of horarium, prayers, devotions, recreations, silence, the vows, etc. the goals must never be lost sight of. What is the purpose? This question must be answered before decisions are made. One final comment: it is impossible for the superior alone to make or create community. She needs good counselors to form a bridge. The counselors must help make decisions and understand why they were made and also be able to explain them if necessary to the sisters in community but above all uphold the decisions. They must be a source of strength to the superior because of their loyalty and advice and also be an example to the sisters in the rank. Mutual confidence and trust must permeate the whole atmosphere of community living.

We can apply to the Sisters of Mercy as a community, a miniature Church, what Father Congar, O.P.,⁷ cites as men's valid claims on the Church; namely, that she be

...less of the world and more in the world; that she be simply the Church of Jesus Christ, the conscience of men in the light of the Gospel, but that she be this with her whole heart.

He points out three characteristics of her presence in the world as outlined in the Acts of the Apostles and New Testament writings to be: Fellowship, Service, Witness.

Despite all that has been said and written on the subject, I am sure we are all in agreement with Father Hogan, C.S.C.⁸ that

...to live out the common life in the genuine spirit of love that it entails is to realize the love which Christ came to spread on earth - it is to live fully the Christian life of the Mystical Body.

⁷M.J. Yves Congar, O.P., Power and Poverty in the Church, Helicon, Baltimore, 1964, p. 137.

⁸William F. Hogan, C.S.C., No Race Apart, Stonehill College, North Easton, Mass., p. 36.