

## COMMUNITY

Community is integral to our Redemptorist missionary life. It is one of the most striking characteristics of Redemptorist spirituality. Without community we are simply charismatic freelance preachers or social workers. From the beginning Alphonsus had a concept of community. It was, however, a concept that he experimented with regularly. The daily life was always adapted to the missionary needs of the early confreres. Indeed, as he wrote to Maria Celeste: 'I have no practical experience of community life, Celeste. Moreover, I am an ignoramus.'

Alphonsus did not set out to create a monastic way of living; rather it was a life centered on the mission. So it included prayer together, reflection together, mission preparation together and relaxation together. The timetable was not rigid, and allowed much free time for personal reflection and for study. It was not, in this sense, about being around one another much of the time. Rather it was about spending quality time together over the things that mattered. It was in this way an aid to the apostolate, and not an end in itself. It existed to make our work among the abandoned more effective and focused.

That is why he walked out of the Chapter of 1764 in which already rule upon rule was being added to make our home life more structured. This tendency to highlight the home life grew under the Vicar General, Fr Passerat, and was strictly enforced under the near 40 year period of incumbency of Fr Nicholas Mauron as Rector Major, soon followed by a similar lengthy generalate of Fr Patrick Murray. By the middle of the last century community was identified precisely as the home life, as the body of men observing a rigid timetable in the one place. Redemptorist literature such as Achille Desurmont's *The Harmony of Our Rule*, and the writings of Louis Colin attest to this.

After a period of experimentation between the 1969 and 1979 Chapters, a new understanding of community life emerged. The New Constitutions and Statutes devote a complete chapter to the Apostolic Community (Chapter 2). They cite community as indispensable for the Redemptorist missionary endeavour, 'an essential law of life for all the members is this; that they live in community and carry out their apostolic work through community' (Const. 21).

The Constitutions invite us to discern whether certain works are in keeping with membership of a Redemptorist community, and challenge us to a new level of community. 'Community does not truly exist when members merely live together; it requires as well genuine sharing on the human and spiritual level' (Const. 21).

Our Constitutions make use of the post-Vatican II understanding of the human person, inviting us to personal growth and development, to friendship and intimacy, to maturity and responsibility. No longer are they external rules to be lived, but deep human values that have to be internalized.

In eight Articles, the 24 Constitutions and 15 Statutes on 'Apostolic Community' challenge Redemptorists to live more intensely a dedicated life together for the sake of the mission. They call us not simply to be men of prayer – but of contemplation, echoing the desire of Alphonsus: 'The life of the members should be one of continuous recollection. To attain this, they shall have at heart the practise of the presence of God' (Pontifical Rule Part II, Chapter III). Coupled with this is an invitation through community to selflessness, and therefore availability for those in need. 'Spending themselves for others' (Const. 41) is an experience of the kenosis, lived in Redemptorist community.

A noteworthy feature is the warning in the Constitutions that community must never allow us to turn in on ourselves, but always to remember that we are also members of other communities. Accordingly, any Redemptorist community must constantly be listening to, and looking at, the signs of the times to see where

the needs of evangelization are greatest. In other words, community is not an end in itself. It is always at the service of the Mission. Nevertheless it must be a real feature of the life of any Redemptorist.

The experience of the last twenty years has indicated a diminution of community living as outlined by the Constitutions. A minimalist approach has been followed in many places. Prayers are said and meals are taken together. This is not community as envisaged by the Constitutions. Carried to its extreme, individualism (often in the name of the apostolate) has become commonplace in many parts of the Congregation. In its acute form, individualism harms community life as suggested in the letter of Fr Pfab: 'Those who do not intend to live according to our vocation should leave.' Likewise Fr Lasso deplored the fact that 'some confreres use our communities as hotels from which they go out to do their work'.

Young people coming to us seek community. It is inevitable that at times they idealise it; and community alone will never keep anyone in the Congregation. We are missionaries. Nevertheless, the cry of society today for meaningful relationships invites Redemptorists to reevaluate our understanding and practise of community.

### **SUGGESTED READING**

Constitutions and Statutes. Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. Rome 2002

Communicanda 11 (December 1988): The Redemptorist Apostolic community: Itself a Prophetic and Liberation Proclamation of the Gospel.

Fraternal Life in Community. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Rome 1994

Raponi Santino: The charism of the Redemptorists in the Church. A commentary on the Constitutions. Rome 2003. Chapter Four: The Apostolic Community

Charism 2000: A Journey in Redemptorist Spirituality. Rome

Charism 2001: Apostolic Community. Rome

Charism 3: The Apostolic Community Dedicated to Christ the Redeemer

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. Community means a certain presence to one another. How many people do you think constitutes a minimum for a real community life?
2. The concept of the Open Community and the Organized Community in our Constitutions provide us with a challenge in terms of non-Redemptorists sharing our life and our work. What is your experience of Redemptorist collaborative living, i.e. living with non Redemptorists in community?
3. How can I achieve a true balance of pastoral outreach and also quality presence to my brethren?
4. A Community of Conversion offer us the possibility of human challenge. How does this work out in practice in my life?

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