

## Building Community today, as Redemptorists

Fr. Serafino Fiore, C.Ss.R.

### Foreword

While I thank you for your invitation, I cannot hide the fact that in preparing an outline of my own to share with you, some **doubts** crossed my mind: how to speak of community to confreres who are part of a community that is, to say the least, original and multiform, unique in the whole Congregation, made up of as many different interests ("mission") as there are groups that make it up? A community made up of confreres from different cultures, many of whom know they are only here for a short time? A community where professors and experts from various disciplines live and work, in front of whom I risk saying inaccurate or approximate things?

A first answer to these questions tells me that **everyone**, no one excluded, including the learned and the wise, is **challenged** by the theme of community. After all, each of us, as the years go by, ends up creating for ourselves a space, an idea of community and a way of relating to it; a space that can sometimes become a **nest**, a refuge. And it is from this space that the theme of community somehow wants to pull us out, wants to 'flush us out' in order to get us through the mesh of relationships, of confrontation with the other, of confrontation with God and with what he asks of us. Each of us never stops **learning** from that demanding and often merciless teacher that is life, of which one of the most demanding lessons concerns community.

Another question crossed my mind: what more and better to say than what **the General Chapter** has already said (particularly in the Final Document of the second phase) on such a fundamental and decisive theme as community life? What more and better to say than what **the Superior General** said to the whole Congregation in the valuable letter sent to the Congregation last December,<sup>1</sup> in the framework of the year dedicated to community life?

I could only answer these questions with other questions: **what use** do we make of what comes from those confreres - be it a Superior General or a (V)Provincial or the members of the General Chapter themselves - to whom we have entrusted the dual ministry of **governance and communion**? Let us take it for granted that they are fallible persons, as much as and perhaps more than we are: but if there is something specific in their task (once we used to speak of the grace of office, which sometimes becomes 'burden of office') this is firstly called '**overall vision**', while we normally miss something of what they know (often for reasons of prudence); and secondly, the concern to implement **here and now** what we find beautiful and great in our Constitutions or in the Word of God itself. **Overall vision** and actualization from which the other confreres are not dispensed, but which are not their first daily concern.

In reality we all know, myself for one, the fate we reserve for a **Circular**, a Communicanda, a letter that reaches us from a Superior. I am not talking about the air of complacency, indifference or even worse, ignorance that we reserve for these documents. Rather, I want to think of **the positive**, of the confrere who reads, takes in, and moves on, because there are many things to be done, studied and read. I wonder with you: **an individual use** of these documents is not - though not intended - an endorsement of some form of individualism? If the General Chapter used the verb "**re-imagine**" several times, is this not a field in which to put this verb to work? In our creativity, can we not find ways to share these texts, perhaps to criticise them, or to react? I am not nostalgic for the days when

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<sup>1</sup> *Some Reflections on the Quality of our Community Life*

circulars were read at the dinner table. I only wish to raise a question, and perhaps respond to a need that remains: to make common use, to put at the service of the common good what concerns everyone.

### Faith and Fraternal Life

I find myself very much **in tune** with what has been determined by the General Government, which has put Community life first in its programme of animation of the Congregation. I do so in the light of my most recent experience, that of Provincial Superior (even though I am about to end my term), but also of that more distant in time (14 years have passed!) which has allowed me to have a direct and prolonged knowledge of our religious family.

I was and am convinced that **the first urgency** for the Congregation is *to rediscover community as its fundamental law* (Const. 21). It is not the Mission that we are lacking, on the contrary, it acquires splendour and relevance even in the face of unprecedented scenarios and all to be explored, such as those of the third millennium. It is not the poor and the abandoned that we will miss, we will always have them with us (Jn 12:8). Challenges and problems afflict the formation and governance of the apostolic community, like our Consecration itself. But it is the Community that is **the filter** through which everything passes, and without which everything comes to a halt.

Fr General tells us this clearly in his letter on Community Life: "*we started with the community because it is a fragile reality in the Congregation*" (# 1). And immediately afterwards he reminds us that this concern afflicts the whole of religious life today: the Vatican Dicastery for Consecrated Life reports that the main reasons why at least two thousand religious leave consecrated life each year are the loss of faith and community life.

The reasons why faith is extinguished in the life of a consecrated person can be many, starting from giving in to a **scientific** explanation of reality, which explains the world as the fruit of chance, or from our frustrated claim to give God a face, falling into the first of all sins, that of idolatry.

Rather, I would like to highlight **the relationship** between faith and community life. Not only in the sense understood by Fr General, when he asks us whether we believe enough in community life (2.a), but at a further level of depth. That which makes us say that faith and community stand together, or sink together.

What makes me descend to this level is an observation: if, over the decades, community life continues to be **a problem** for many, if we do not manage to get to the bottom of it despite the many **attempts** that have been made and urged (think of the *Plan for Community Life*, the proposals for ongoing formation, the calls for decision-making processes, etc.), then clearly the solution must be sought at another level than simply that of techniques or methodologies. Either we are able to descend to this deeper level, which calls into question **faith**, or the techniques and methodologies end up becoming forms of overkill on a terminally ill person, in this case the community. And I hope I do not appear catastrophic.

This level calls into question the consistency of our relationship with God. We must admit that in spite of ourselves, due to a lack of awareness due to simple routine, a sort of **erosion** occurs in our lives of that 'yes' that one day we enthusiastically pronounced before God. Fr General alludes to this risk when he says: "*A religious community that does not have a relationship with God is empty*" ... and - for concreteness - he adds immediately afterwards: "*The relationship with God includes personal and community prayer*" (no. 1-a).

If this happens, if this erosion occurs, it is not always because of macroscopic faults or failures on the part of Titius or Caius. After all, it is the air we breathe, it is the **post-modern** culture that foments it. I try to capture this air within a formula, the famous '**D-factor**', which merely - so to speak - removes the initial of the word God, leaving bare and in the same breath the omnipotent 'I'. (DIO, take away 'D' and we are left with 'Io' or 'I')

When I speak of the D factor, I mean **the way I look** at history, people, news, community, the confrere who sits next to me or whom I pass in the corridor. It is a mental stance that for us Redemptorists presupposes **contemplation**: a word we instinctively exclude from our vocabulary, believing it to be the prerogative of cloistered monks and Carthusians, or perhaps it has found its way into our Constitutions by who knows what route, not appropriate for missionaries.

For my part, I am convinced that a Redemptorist who speaks of contemplation does so by drawing on **the heart of Alphonsus**, provided that he does not reduce his spirituality to a series of fabricated definitions, or hasty syntheses.

I think we appreciate Alphonsus better if we see him as a navigator of a **river**, which starts with the Fathers of Monasticism, passes through Hesychasm, reaches Meister Eckart and the Rhenish Mystics, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, and which through Alphonsus reaches what today is configured as **profound prayer**: a desire for prayer that can take us away from the superficiality and disorientation that dominate today. If, in Alphonsus, verbal prayer takes over from silence, this happens for an almost exclusively missionary reason, to put simple content of the highest quality on his lips (Fr Giuseppe De Luca), but the stakes are the same: think of the logic of love that pervades the *Visits to the Blessed Sacrament* or the *Practice of Loving Jesus Christ*, or the heavenly assembly that decides the incarnation (see the *Novena in Preparation for Christmas*) because God has lost the one with whom he shared his delights; or of when Alphonsus says that God's paradise is the heart of the human being (*Way of conversing familiarly with God*); or of the same conception that underlies *Uniformity to God's Will*, making facts a way of loving and falling in love with God.

Sorry for the long digression, it was just to say that contemplation is an **indispensable dimension** of our faith (and community life). Reason for our Constitutions when they see it as a condition:

*"To develop and strengthen faith, and to recognise God in people and in everyday events, to grasp in his true light his plan of salvation and to distinguish reality from illusion"* (Cf. **Const. 24**).

I think a quote from Thomas Merton helps us better understand what is at stake today:

*The 'I' that operates in the world, that thinks about itself, that observes its own reactions, that talks about itself, is not the 'true I' that has been united with God in Christ. It is at best the garment, the mask, the disguise of that mysterious and unknown 'I' that most of us never truly come to know until after death. Our outer personality is neither eternal nor spiritual; it is far from being so. This 'I' is destined to disappear like smoke. It is utterly fragile and evanescent. Contemplation is precisely the realisation that this 'I' is in fact the 'not I' (...). Nothing is more contrary to contemplation than Descartes' cogito ergo sum. "I think, therefore I am". This is the declaration of an alienated being, exiled from his spiritual depths, forced to seek solace in the proof of his existence (!) based on the observation that he 'thinks'. (...) He arrives at his being as if it were an objective reality, i.e. he strives to become aware of himself as he would be of something outside himself. And he proves that such a 'thing' exists. And he convinces himself: 'I am therefore something'. Then he goes on to convince himself that even God, the infinite, the transcendent, is a 'thing', an 'object' like other finite and limited*

*objects in our thinking! Hell can be defined as perpetual alienation from our true being, from our true 'I' that is in God. (Seeds of Contemplation, 2).*

I find these words extraordinary in their effectiveness and clarity. They help us to distinguish contemplation from reason, and to understand what belongs to one and what belongs to the other. And to ask ourselves: **on which side of the court** am I playing, that of God, or that of the ego? There is no way to stay in the stands among the audience. Either you are on one side or the other, *tertium non datur*.

If reason is responsible for so many beautiful and good things that I am not going to enumerate here, but also for everything that Pope Francis calls **self-referentiality**, or worldliness, I think that in the orbit proper to contemplation, **inner freedom**, detachment, gratuitousness, asceticism, enthusiasm, chastity, meditation, things done out of love for Jesus Christ, reminding myself - once and a hundred times - that my life is a GIFT (*DONO*), that my faith is ABANDONMENT (*ABANDONO*) or it is not.

All this may seem like a list of abstract ideals, of "*values*", as they are often called: but I can say, in the light of my personal experience (a former formator, with knowledge of the Congregation and ... of the Province), that in the end it all boils down to the **logic** with which we approach our living. In the end we must admit (I repeat: not as an ideological proclamation, but as a statement of fact) that we often stop at the first two dimensions of Christian anthropology, the *biòs* and the *psyké*, sacrificing that of the *pneuma* (or *zoè* for John).

I think this awareness should be the raw material of **formation**, already in its initial stages. If it is not sufficiently assimilated, it takes away from one's own and daily effort to make the "*thought of Christ*" our own (1 Cor 2:16). And it manifests itself in the **sclerosis of the heart**, which not only allows the libel of repudiation, but also so many manifestations that we are forced to trace back to "*character*", to "*that's just the way it is*", to ruthless judgments, to distancing oneself from others; or to exchanging - as Fr General says in his letter - *the community for a hotel* (nr 1.a).

### **At What Point Are We?**

One of the statements that drew my attention the most in the Preparatory Document for the second phase of the XXVI General Chapter is found in the last paragraph:

*The 26th General Chapter could be one of the most important of recent times in the renewal of our apostolic life. Will we be courageous in the direction we must take? Will we respond to the promptings of the Spirit, especially in a post-pandemic context where the world is no longer the same? How will we respond, as a Congregation, being faithful to the Spirit, the Gospel and the founding charism? That depends on each one of us... (nr 106)*

Now that we have already celebrated not only the second but also the third phase of the Chapter, what can we say about this 'might'? Has the Chapter slipped through our fingers, leaving not the slightest trace on a par with its predecessors?

In asking myself these questions, I am the first to acknowledge **my failure**. I am also a child of this time, tempted to give the Chapter's Final Document the same importance (and less time) that I reserve for Netflix's latest series.

On the other hand, only eight years separate us from **2032**, when the Congregation will celebrate the three hundredth anniversary of its foundation: **a good opportunity** to look back, take stock and re-imagine ourselves with a just and sacrosanct re-imagination.

Looking back, we can say that there has been no lack of **stimuli**, attempts have been made. I have already mentioned *the Plan for Community Life*. There has also been no lack of beautiful documents from the Magisterium, such as *Fraternal Life in Community*, which reminds us of the greatness and at the same time of the fatigue proper to every community, the passage from the I to the WE... On the other hand, you will agree with me that the Second chapter of our **Constitutions** is particularly beautiful and intense, representing a high ideal, if you will, which also integrates with some concrete conditions of life (*community of prayer, of persons, ordered, of work, of conversion, open and ordered*).

Then it happens in reality that the very experience of our communities entails for many the risk - especially for newly professed or newly ordained priests - of the so-called 'I do not understand, but I adapt'. In order not to be a nuisance, *pro bono pacis*... (after all, even our egos agree) we adapt to the lesser, we settle. Lately, other connotations of living in community have been added as excuses, which the General recalls in his letter: *'today communities are smaller, personal agendas are many, relationships have changed, new technologies have entered our lives and community life has become liquid... with often virtual relationships'* (3. a).

Nevertheless, Fr General dares to call for greater **quality** in our community life. It is a word - quality - that recurs no less than eleven times in the document. I hear 'quality', and the word evokes in me the fascination of things done well, whether it be a licence or degree thesis (the methodology!), or a dish prepared with love, the passion of a Michelangelo in thinking up, sculpting and finishing the Pieta, the editing of our favourite film, the care with which Mozart composed his symphonies. We should reserve the same **care** for the community, everyone and no one excluded, guarding against any temptation to approximation.

I hear the word 'quality', and I think of community as a lamp placed on the lampstand (Mk 4:21) to illuminate a world like ours, fundamentally inspired by individualism. I think that a community that seeks quality must make its own an active principle implicit in our Constitutions: approved in 1982, therefore at a distance of 42 years (and we know how much this number means, in an accelerated age like ours!) they may appear outdated, at least in their normative part. But **the active principle** that they entrust to us is really a pass, a green light that tells us: *the Redemptorist is this, the Redemptorist community is this, it is up to you, here and now, in sometimes changing and often disorienting situations, to "invent" what can and must be done to save the substance. Prayer times, attendance at meetings, formative moments: we ask you to do what you can. But it is not that when faced with the limitations of each situation, you end up throwing the baby (the substance) out with the bathwater (the impossibility of keeping certain commitments)*. Unfortunately, in the light of my experience, I have to say that this is what happens.

But the General's letter does not only ask us to respect the decision-making processes, it tells us something more, and here I see a **quantum leap** that challenges me. It is where he reminds us that *"community is the place where we share our existence, our history of salvation and our memories of redemption"* (Conclusion). The **qualitative leap** should consist in remembering that in each of us there are residues of humanity, situations linked to our past and fears of our present, limitations proper to our body or character, which we have somehow confined to areas unreachable to ourselves. These are unattainable spaces and yet they belong to us, spaces that the Gospel with the concreteness of

Semitic language defines as unclean, and which Jesus also heals. To dream of sharing all this in our communities is perhaps impossible. But at least reminding ourselves that we are also this can only do us good.

If this is the case, the real reconfiguration - not only of our Units but of our Communities themselves - should consist in **rescheduling** times, reprogramming commitments, putting structures at the service of people, creating the premises for listening to one another ("*To relate to others is always to learn*", no. 1.b), making our communities workshops of **synodality**. And all this - mind you - not out of a misunderstood sense of comfort, not to make the community a happy island in a complicated world: it is all for the mission. *The first to suffer, from a self-referential vision, is precisely the mission, because such a vision leads us to be preachers for others, without living what we preach* (2.j).

And on the other hand, there remains, beyond all this, a large and decisive margin of **grace**. It is not necessarily the case that taking the leap, or being a witness for this world, automatically 'works'. They are not necessarily rewarded by a vocational response. We only do it because we feel that in this time of ours, in the proper creaturely logic of evolution towards the good, we cannot shirk our vocation. In the end we will say "*we are useless servants. We have done what we had to do*" (Lk 17:10).

## Humility

For this last point, I would like to reserve space for a virtue that is as decisive as ever today, Humility. Beyond an abstract ascetic exercise, or the temptation to use it ... to avoid fatigue, I see humility as that fibreglass or carbon fibre pole - flexible and at the same time solid - that athletes use to cross a bar set at 'impossible' heights (6 metres and more), without dropping it.

It takes humility to learn from life, and to understand that life does not go on without the fuel represented by love. I am convinced that in Alfonsus' spiritual journey - what has rightly been called an 'exodus' - **Via dei Tribunali** in Naples was a decisive stage. There, in a corner that still escapes the eye of the tourist, is the little church of Sant'Angelo a Segno, the site of his first Neapolitan ministry as a priest. Even today, it is still a concentration of effervescent and boisterous life. We can imagine that Alfonsus was suddenly faced with humble people who, in order to earn a living, to carry on a family, to keep wine-drinking men and overly lively children at bay, faced all kinds of sacrifices and despair. Imagine the question that must have been going through his head: but to these people, **where does the strength to go on come from?** And the answer will have been the same as we would give: it is love. Uniquely and simply love. Alfonsus' genius was in transposing this human strength into the relationship with God.

It takes humility to learn from **the laity**, to transfer to the sphere of consecration the same passion that animates their relationships with their loved ones, with their children. It does us good to read love poems, or the verses of so many songwriters from every nation, to understand that love never gives up, love always gives new wings, love is always concrete and creative, love is what remains at the end, to quote St Paul.

We need humility **with ourselves**, because especially in the stages of youth and adulthood a misunderstood sense of freedom makes us think we are above all judgement. When we reach a more mature age, at least it happens to me, looking at some of our sins we make our own the Psalmist's prayer: 'I was foolish and did not understand, I stood before you like a beast' (Ps 73:22).

On the other hand, we must also be humble for **a scientific reason**, with a realistic look at our cranial box, which houses 90 billion neurons, each of which is capable of establishing up to ten thousand synapses with its neighbours (G. Tonelli, Genesis, 212). That is to say, even our presumed freedoms (by which we mean the mechanisms established in our lives, our ways of thinking, the gratifications we allow ourselves, not to mention our transgressions) we pay dearly for: something is structured in our brains, synapses are consolidated, and are difficult if not impossible to deconstruct. Something in line with the Latin saying *Natura non facit saltus*.

Impossible for human beings but not for God. **His grace** can do everything, provided we make a journey backwards, and devote ourselves to an equally constant and patient exercise, to rediscover any profound motive for our consecration or ministry: be it a true relationship of love with Jesus Christ, be it right intention, be it truth with ourselves. But even for this exercise, much humility is needed.

Translated from the Original Italian by Fr Joseph Ivel Mendanha, C.Ss.R.