

Experts in Communion?

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« Experts in Communion »¹, that is what Pope Francis calls us to become ! The standard to reach is high : experts are people who are top masters in their field of competence and who are able to guide others since they are usually ahead of others in their field.....Experts in Communion? We would rather describe ourselves as « walking towards communion», since we are aware that our religious life is a life-long learning about the real meaning of «loving» in truth....Is the Pope's request impossible or unrealistic?

In His very last prayer, heart-to-heart with the Holy Father just before his Passion, Jesus reveals us a key to enter the mystery of Communion : « That all people be made one, like you Father, Who are in me and I am in you »². From all the eternity, the Father gives himself to the Son and the Son gives himself to the Father, the Father welcomes the Son and the Son welcomes the Father and the Holy Spirit is the fruit of this exchange of love. In contemplating this mystery, opening our minds to be « like», Communion is perceived as a supernatural reality, rooted at the core of our being, like a call : it is indeed our first vocation – made in the likeness of God the Trinity, we are completely fulfilled only when we live in his likeness, when we « abide in love»³... Love is a dynamic mutual giving and receiving – to which we are called to participate - which unites the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit.

One of the greatest paradoxes which is also one of the inner struggles common to most consecrated, is the difficulty to live such communion in our daily lives, beside our deep desire to follow Christ and to live truly Evangelical lives.... We know the theory, we meditate the Word, we meet to debate topics such as inter-culture and inter-generations, but often we resent being unable to understand each other, to wholeheartedly deliver us, we try to change the others rather accepting them as they are ; often individualism limits us; often we prefer to be involved in our ministry and fulfill our tasks rather than deliver us to our closest brothers and sisters.....Yet, as Mother Teresa loved to repeat, « love begins at home»⁴!

To penetrate the mystery of Communion, I believe, it is fundamental to truly focus on the dimension of acceptance⁵, since it is true that « love means giving all, giving one's self»⁶, without acceptance our gift might be shortsighted by being self-centered in our search : giving, being at the service and being useful to the others brings great joy even self satisfaction! Only who accepts with simplicity can give with humility. Without acceptance, our gift runs the risk of being one-sided, top-down for the person we want to help ; without acceptance, our gift can even be

¹ Pope Francis, *Apostolic letter to all consecrated*, 21 November 2014, § 1.2.

² Jn 17, 21.

³ See. Jn 15, 9.

⁴ “Love begins at home, and it is not how much we do... but how much love we put in that action”.

⁵ Strangely enough, papers on spirituality are abundant while few are those on acceptance studied as an integral part of love. Curieusement, alors que les ouvrages de spiritualité sur le don sont très nombreux, rares sont les études consacrées à l'accueil en tant que dimension intégrante de l'amour.

⁶ Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, *Poetry*, Cerf DDB, 1979, p. 247.

transformed into an act of possession (*my cafeteria, my biblical group...*). Acceptance purifies our gift when it goes with opening our heart, ready to accept what the other can offer....The gift answers the question « What can I do for the others ? » acceptance is like a velvet touch encouraging to ask « What can I do for you ? »⁷ but also « What would you enjoy doing for me? » concerned with putting the other first, giving the joy to please, to give and to love.

« Yes, thank you ! »

It is so much easier and natural to say « no thank you » ! Our motivations are many and legitimate, although often unavowed : I can manage ; it is far easier to solve it myself rather than explaining what should be done ; if someone else does it, in any case I will have to verify; I know things necessary to understand the situation; I *want* to do everything I *can still* do; you have so much work; etc... A panoply of reasons to put efficiency before Communion, undermining the credibility of our evangelical testimony and of love, thus of our life's fertility. A number of underlining ways to imply: « I don't need you ». Besides the question of accepting the other isn't there also the happiness to need someone? Let's look at Mary, the most perfect among human creatures, how She needed Joseph and how Jesus, the Lord of our history and King of the Universe, needed his parents, friends, women following Him and how much He keeps relying on us today Could we imagine Jesus replying « no thank you » to Simon of Cyrene ?

Having the possibility of living in community, is having the possibility to tell the world : I need my brothers, my sisters, but *not them indistinctively* but *each* of them. Not for their services – it would be utilitarianism, not acceptance – but for what he is, for what she is ; because he and she are a gift of the Creator received to enrich me; because his/her point of view – different from mine – invites me to open up my heart; because more people think better than one; because we do not interpret the message of Jesus Christ in the same way which encourages me to constantly investigate, to further penetrate the Mystery of Love.... Therefore, to become experts in communion, let's learn to say more often « Yes, thank you ! » Yes I accept your help; Yes, I welcome the idea you suggest; Yes I appreciate the time you devote to me....Each *yes* is a sign of trust, each *yes* is way to value the other : I give up a little bit of myself, to leave you more space, to grant you the joy to give; each *yes* is a way of loving because it is like saying « I need you » and because it allows us to mature in humility. There are three degrees in love: love need , love service and love self-esteem⁸ . Communion resides in the latter, since esteem is both gift and acceptance – I give my trust and I accept you as you are, not as I would like you to be... ,

The cactus example

Entering into such logic of acceptance, allows us to gradually understand that even in a situation of dependency love can be abundant : it is not only linked to offering one's dependency (offering is also a gift) but to dependency itself, as such. Often, people declare: « I don't want to depend on anyone», « I pray not to be bedridden»...Although such concern is understandable, I believe it is never too late to « accept/come to terms with » dependency, which must be viewed as part of love and not as an optional aspect. In other words, dependency should be considered as acceptance in its purest state, with whatever it implies in terms of trust and rely on others...Let's not be afraid to accept and to be dependent on each other! When we will no longer be able to run, when our mental condition will no longer allow us to give, our heart will always be able to welcome....like little children⁹. Let's train our heart to be open ! If we live the communion, we will not be caught off by illnesses and old-age dependency , but it will be our way of loving to our last

⁷ Lc 18, 41.

⁸ Cf. A Carthusian , *Towards Spiritual Maturity (Vers la maturité spirituelle)*, Publisher de la Renaissance, 2002, pg. 33.

⁹ Cf. Ps 131 (130), 2 ; Mt 18, 3.

breath. Since our novitiate, we are well aware that holiness is more the result of *letting do* than *doing* : one must not aim at perfection, but let God act through us...But it takes a lifetime to learn the difference between what we know and accept to rely on others !

We all remained surprised when some bad-tempered people, become an example of patience and kindness when bed-ridden...I wonder whether such docility isn't the result of a lifelong intimate struggle, which lead them to fully accept their difficulties in abandoning themselves to Mercy. They had to bear with daylong unpleasant remarks in house, they felt the humiliation of being fingered as « Watch out, cactus! » and to constantly ask to be forgiven for their ups and downs....They also wondered why life seems so easy for « everybody else»... They silently cried in the their prayers, they beseeched God to free them from their temper and they were heard « My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness»¹⁰. They kept their thorns but at the same time, they remained faithful to their vocation for and against everything, well aware that every cactus hides in its core an invaluable drop of water which flows from God and returns to God...They understood that this drop of water originates from their heart-to-heart with Mercy, the source of their lives' fertility – fertility hidden from human eyes, but vitally true in the Communion of Saints. Once they are deprived of their ability to *do*, once powerless, paralyzed and dependent, they can only let themselves go, as they have always secretly done beyond their surly appearance. Their weaknesses disclosed them the Grace: they welcome care in the same way they welcomed Mercy....

Accept difference or a Symphony Orchestra

Recently at an international meeting, a Sister told me in confidence: « Difference is often considered source of richness, well personally, I am proud to admit I feel more comfortable with people like me ! Difference upsets me and wears me : I want to promote the richness of similarity.» A provocation ? Clearly. However, should we simply sweep it aside ? Isn't it rather an open assertion of what many think in themselves ? What about the saying in popular wisdom « birds of a feather flock together » ?

It is a fact that instinctively people do not like difference. It is disturbing. It means living with people we haven't chosen, who have a different approach to reality, who think , act differently, people from other generations or nationalities, with a different education or theological formation....Such variety is destabilizing since it questions our way of looking at things. Simply by looking around us (and our communities), when faced with someone different, often the first reaction is to dominate the other –the weakest must surrender through segregation –let's keep the other at some distance; or eliminate the other – since you upset me, you must be quiet and vanish.

Is it therefore impossible for different people to live together in communion ? The image of a symphony orchestra, often mentioned¹¹, would prove the opposite....Impossible, No. Difficult, Yes. Communion, like harmony is the fruit of a long, demanding and persistent effort... The Gospel is our symphony ; Christ is both the composer and the director – even more He is Music personified; each of us plays one's partition (at His place which belongs to Him); the quality of the ensemble is not only the result of an individual effort but of the love we all have for music, of the desire to follow our Director, aiming at achieving symphonic beauty. If a musician wants to play

¹⁰ 2Co 12, 9.

¹¹ See for instance the *Speech* of Pope Francis before the participants at the 37th National Convocation of the Renewal in the Holy Spirit at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on June 1, 2014.

In early centuries, well before the existence of orchestras, the Fathers of the Church, such as Saint Ignatius of Antioch and Saint Athanasius had compared communion within the Church to harmony among choir singers.

louder, or does not listen to the other, if a triangle envies the role of an oboe, if a piano spends more time in criticizing the others instead of playing or if the first violin (= the principal, the one guiding the movement) is convinced to be the director...there is no hope for a successful symphony!

It is interesting to stress that one of the most frequent comments made at the end of our Chapters or Assemblies is : « What unites us is more important than what divides us». We underline the fraternal atmosphere, the mutual listening, the search for a common good, the quality of liturgy, our devotion to our Charisma, our joy to be consecrated... Such gatherings among us are privileged moments of Grace since we can go back to the source of our vocation and live a strong moment of communion, regardless of our differences....At last we go back to what is essential : the symphony we are called to play all together. They represent an opportunity to question us once more on what do we *really* want to do in our life : a journey of individual ambition or a *sequela Christi* where we invite the others to join and walk together towards eternal communion ?

« Duc in altum »

The invitation of Pope Francis to become experts in communion brings us before the magnificence of our vocation, with its full beauty as well as all it demands . We are called to live in depth, in the inner core where Trinity resides, where we are surrounded by Mercy and where the Spirit of Love overwhelms us with its gifts...To live in depth, means to overcome what's upsetting, impulsive reactions, prejudices, sensitiveness, to dive deep into our will, where we *decide* to love. It implies a permanent decision to renew, just as we regularly reconfirm our *yes* to consecration. To live in depth means to understand that we are only ones who must change and who must take seriously the daily call to conversion, to listening He Who is « gentle and humble in heart»¹². To live in depth, implies being convinced that « absolute similarity is sterile. Exchange is creative. Otherness is fundamental to live in communion. Wonder involves difference»¹³. God intentionally *made us* different in order to need the others and thus live in communion¹⁴ : let's keep this in mind when we pray « thy will be done» ! God's will is my holiness, my brothers and sisters' holiness, it is our endless happiness in communion..... Let's progress « into deep waters »¹⁵, and let's sincerely accept each other, not simply by preparing a local dish on a Birthday or to include in our liturgy a folk dance at offertory....

We can ask ourselves, for instance : which is the level of communication among us ? Some communities are happy with a mere exchange of information concerning their daily organization. Being familiar with life in common, we mutually respect each other, roles are assigned according to individual skills and affinities in order to avoid invading others' field of action which allows us to move forward with limited frictions...but it is by no means a life in communion. To live in depth, implies taking the risk of expressing our thoughts or feelings, aware that we expose ourselves to disagreement, misunderstanding or being judged by our brothers and sisters...; It is an essential risk to live in communion, since expressing our thoughts and feelings is a way of giving ourselves to our brothers and sisters and by listening to what they want to share about themselves, is a way of accepting them. It requires great freedom (therefore humility); an open spirit, availability to exchange views ; an open heart to understand and relate ; it requires full mutual trust, which must be rooted in prayer – under the look of Who chose us and united us – It requires a heart in peace to look at others with that true love which makes him live and grow, the look of wonder before

¹² Mt 11, 29.

¹³ Jean-Noël Bezançon, (*God is not alone*) *Dieu n'est pas solitaire*, Paris, DDB, 1999, p. 21.

¹⁴ Cf. Saint Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, n. 148.

¹⁵ Lc 5, 4.

God's work on us. Peace of heart comes from the absolute certainty that we are infinitely loved for what we are : certainty based on listening the Word of God, which penetrates in the prayer of adoration, nourished with the Eucharist...

For a supernatural reality, supernatural means ! Communion is a gift from the Above: let's invoke it in praying *Our Father*; let's daily invoke the Spirit of Communion forcefully and with persistence¹⁶, to teach us to love; let's follow the Virgin Mary, our Lady of Welcome in being humble and available...In order to become experts in Communion, let's be open to renewal, to rediscover the Grace of our religious consecration, let's further open our hearts to the free and merciful Love of our Lord, in order to transform our lives into the Eucharist, in other words, into both a gift of all ourselves as well as a constant thanksgiving.

¹⁶« Walk by the Holy Spirit...This is the fruit of the Spirit : love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.». (Gal 5, 16.22-23.) Let's not pray the Spirit only when taking decisions or during our gatherings !