

# **BROTHERS IN COMMUNITY**



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**BROTHERS OF CHRISTIAN INSTRUCTION**

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## INTRODUCTION

The General Chapter of March 2018 encourages us to "*live out our identity as Brothers in a new way and to let ourselves be converted to authentic fraternity by God.*"<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the prosperity and the beauty of our Congregation depend in large part on the vitality of each Brother and of each community. Is not a tree known by its own fruit?

This circular letter, "**Brothers in Community**", wishes to exhort us to *return to the Wellspring* if we are to welcome the grace of conversion to fraternal life and be fruitful. It invites us to *reach out to others* if "*we want to build communities of welcome, mutual forgiveness, healing of wounds and profound fraternal communion*"<sup>2</sup>. It encourages us to *dare go to the peripheries* because the Lord gives us a rendezvous and precedes us there.

This letter is addressed to all the Brothers, elder and younger Brothers, so that they lend each other mutual support to move forward together on the path of holiness which is nothing other than the willingness to allow oneself "*to be converted by God to authentic fraternity*". Thus, holiness will become the most beautiful face of the Congregation and of the Church (cf. *Gaudete and Exultate*, no. 9). In addition, Lay Mennaisians can benefit greatly from this letter by going more deeply into the charism of the fraternity that they are invited to share with the

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<sup>1</sup> General Chapter 2018, n° 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, n° 13.

Brothers. Isn't this a great opportunity for each Brother and each community to learn "*to live more and more as members of the Mennaisian Family*"?<sup>3</sup>. Otherwise, a call to live in the "*Mennaisian Family mode*".

"**Brothers in Community**" comprises three main chapters. The first offers a reflection on *community life as a gift from God*, while the second insists on *fraternal communion*. The last chapter indicates *the raison d'être of the fraternity*: its missionary dimension.

More than a letter to peruse, I hope that "**Brothers in Community**" will really become a tool for ongoing formation in each community. To this end, questions will be asked here and there to help go further. Why not build a whole programme of meetings and sharing to take further the study of this circular together? I therefore invite the community superiors to show audacity and creativity so that each Brother takes advantage of this tool in order to center his life more radically on Christ, "*the firstborn among many brothers*" (Rom 8, 29).

May the meditation of this circular letter help us experience the beauty of being-brothers-together and resolutely commit us to the path of conversion to fraternity!

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, n° 16.

# CHAPTER I

## WELCOMING THE GIFT OF FRATERNITY

*"If you only knew the gift of God,"* Jesus tells the Samaritan woman (Jn 4, 10). The gift of God par excellence is the very person of the Son, *"the firstborn among many brothers"* (Rom 8, 29). On becoming man, the Word of God becomes one of us and teaches us to live as brothers.

*As participants in the life of God who is love and who is the mystical exemplar of personal relations, the Brothers are brought together in Christ's name. They delight in his presence as this unity is strengthened by his prayer to the Father: "May they be one in us".* (Jn 17:21) **(Rule of Life, C 34)**.

Therefore, to accept the **gift of fraternity** proposed by Jesus is to open one's heart and hands to receive the Spirit who makes us adopted sons and who teaches us to call God, *"our Father"* (Rom 8, 15).

Paul's letter to the Corinthians **(1 Co 12, 4-31)** which speaks of spiritual gifts or charisms will be used as a common thread in this chapter. I do not intend to make an exegetical study of this Pauline passage, but rather a spiritual reading which can shed light on the charism of fraternity received from the Lord through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

## Many gifts, but the same Spirit

*“ There is a variety of gifts but always the same Spirit; there are all sorts of service to be done, but always to the same Lord; working in all sorts of different ways in different people, it is the same God who is working in all of there” (1 Co 12, 4-6).*

Living as **Brothers in community** is a gift of the grace of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the Spirit makes us discover the beauty of fraternal life. The same Spirit inspires in us the desire to respond and to be faithful to him. He, it is who also accompanies and sustains this attraction to live together. And it is always this Spirit who brings together those who are called to a discipleship experience.

The gifts of the grace of fraternity *“are varied, but it is the same Spirit”* (1 Cor 12,4). When we look at the reality of our Brothers and of our different communities, we see that the charism of fraternity can be expressed in various ways. There are, for example, Brothers who know how to defuse a conflict good-naturedly. Their good humour makes them antidepressants often sought after for their energizing company. Others believe in and are attached to the values of community life. They are the steady rocks on which the whole community relies to forge ahead. They are highly valued for their loyalty, and all know they can count on them. Others are known for their ability to smooth things over and show respect to others. They are untiring listeners without ever passing judgment. They are excellent go-betweens, they constitute dreamed of mediators, impartial and skillful at restoring communion. Others stand out for their availability and their openness to others. Full of tact, they care for everything that others find interesting.



In the words of Br. Bernard Gaudeul, these Brothers "*have inexhaustible reserves of patience and kindness. These are the rays of the sun that warm hearts and make communities happy.*"<sup>4</sup>

"*The ministries are varied, but it is the same Lord*" (1 Co 12, 5) In fact, a good number of Brothers have received **gifts of service** which build and consolidate fraternal life in community. These humble workers in the Lord's vineyard serve above all by being credible witnesses of fraternity.

Some Brothers have opted for the *holy indifference* of which St. Ignatius speaks, that which leads to interior freedom and prompts us to seek the will of God in everything, everywhere and always in communion with others. In so doing, they embody the beatitude of the **poor of heart**. Others have learned day in, day out to act with **humble gentleness** and have gradually set out on the path of perfect charity which, according to Saint Therese of Lisieux, consists in "*enduring the faults of others, not to be surprised at their weaknesses*"<sup>5</sup>. Still others know how **to sympathize with those who suffer**. It is their way of carrying the burden of a Brother's life with him. In fact, they strive to be disciples of Christ with those who suffer and hurt on the path to perfect life.

Another category of Brothers minister to fraternal life in community when they **hunger and thirst for justice**. Thus, they manage to order their life from the double principle of love: love God and love neighbour. Concretely, they are faithful to community prayer, to meditation, to the sacrament of reconciliation, to the visit to the Blessed Sacrament, to lectio vitae and to Marian prayer. They pay attention to each person by showing affection, esteem and consideration. They are charitable and discreet towards all. They know how to restore courage and hope in times of trial. They bear witness to the joy of belonging to a Congrega-

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<sup>4</sup> Brother Bernard GAUDEUL, *Appelés en communauté*, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exultate*, n° 72.

tion whose motto is God Alone and which entrusts itself to Providence. They take their ongoing formation seriously, convinced that this is the way to full maturity.

Another group of Brothers has pledged to see and **act with mercy** following the example of the merciful Father of whom the evangelist Luke speaks (Lk 15: 11-31). As patient as the Father, these Brothers intuitively allow the time and wait for the return and the conversion of the prodigal confrere. Faithful to the example of the Father, they have learned to love their Brother as he is, with his faults, his downfalls and his sin. As generous as the Father, they have the fattened calf killed to celebrate each little victory of a colleague over a bad habit, and they can take two thousand steps when they are pressed for a thousand (Mt 5, 41). As trustful as the Father, they believe that transformation in others is sincere and that it deserves encouragement and accompaniment. Like the Father, they welcome with open arms both, the older brother who is faithful but intolerant, – and blames them for their excessive kindness –, and the prodigal brother who no longer deserves to be called a son.

Still other Brothers devote all their energy to living out the beatitude of the **pure heart** which "*demands a commitment to our brother that comes from the heart*"<sup>6</sup>. They know, as the apostle Paul affirms, that even if they were to distribute all their goods in alms or hand over their bodies to the flames, if they do not have charity, it is of no use to them (1 Cor 13, 3). Living out charity on a daily basis, especially when their brother is rebellious and provokes them at every turn, constitutes a real path of purification of the heart and of sanctification for these Brothers.

A last group of Brothers seek to **make peace** wherever they are:

*"It is not easy to "make" this evangelical peace, which excludes no one but embraces even those who are a bit*

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<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *Ibid.*, n° 85.

*odd, troublesome or difficult, demanding, different, beaten down by life or simply uninterested.”<sup>7</sup>*

For these artisans, building peace is an art that requires serenity, creativity, sensitivity, listening skills and dexterity. In doing so, they help their colleagues build bridges, not barriers.

*There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons* (1 Co 12, 4-6). Some Brothers who are more “**Martha**” than “**Mary**” (Lk 10, 38-42), often rushed by the multiple occupations of fraternal life, serve Jesus and their colleagues by carrying out the tasks entrusted to them and by putting their hearts in everything they do. They care about the well-being of those around them. Creative and inventive, they are forever looking for new solutions to improve the context of fraternal life. Many of them have an innate sense of symbolic and artistic expression. They spontaneously create beauty around them, both in community and in their places of apostolate. Optimists, they know how to boost the morale of the troops and encourage those whose confidence is flagging. Gifted with great organizational skills, they plan and organize everything so that everyone feels comfortable, finds his place and contributes to the construction of community life. Brimming with energy, these tireless workers get their hands dirty, take on challenges and are always ready to get involved. They are men of decision par excellence. Equipped with multiple antennas to detect in others what they prefer or what they need, they can anticipate their requirements.

On the other hand, other Brothers are more “**Mary**” than “**Martha**”. They prefer to sit at the Lord's feet and listen to his Word. They spend long hours in front of the Blessed Sacrament, praying for vocations, interceding for the children and young people entrusted to them, carrying at arm's length the confreres

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, *Ibid.*, n° 89.

and Lay people who are still in the field of education. They never tire of contemplating the face of the Son, *"the firstborn among many brothers."* They recite their rosary daily in silence tirelessly. Like Jesus, they know how to withdraw on their own to pray (Lk 5,16) and sometimes spend whole nights in prayer following his example (Lk 6,12). In fact, the closer they get to Jesus, their elder Brother, the more they become brothers to those whose presence they share.

### **Serving the common good**

*"The particular way in which the Spirit is given to each person is for a good purpose. One may have the gift of preaching with wisdom given him by the Spirit; another may have the gift of preaching instruction given him by the same Spirit; and another the gift of faith given by the same Spirit; another again the gift of healing, through this one Spirit; one, the power of miracles; another, prophecy; another the gift of recognising spirits; another the gift of tongues and another the ability to interpret them. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, who distributes different gifts to different people just as he chooses" (1 Co 12, 7-11).*

*"To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Co 12, 7) The gifts of the Spirit to the Brothers, (1 Co 12, 8-10) whether they are called *wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, prophesying or speaking in tongues* are at the service of the common good par excellence, namely, fraternity. Is not a tree known by its own fruit? On this subject, the apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, describes the fruit of the Spirit which is called: *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, benevolence, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"* (Gal 5, 22-23).*

Thus, the small gestures of love done by many Brothers make our communities more beautiful, more joyful, more welcoming and more attractive. Despite their own limitations and weaknesses, when they strive to be faithful and share their joy, they *“become splendid witnesses, effective proclaimers, companions and neighbours for the women and men with whom they share a common history and who want to find their Father’s house in the Church.”*<sup>8</sup>

When these Brothers endeavor to live in **peace** with those whom the Lord puts on their way, they make others taste the sweetness of fraternal life in community.

When they learn to be **patient** with themselves and with others, they learn **self-control** at the same time.

When they know how to be **benevolent** towards those who are *a priori* hostile to them, they allow others to experience the beauty of **kindness**.

All these relational values, lived daily in small details, patiently build up communities more faithful to the Gospel and to the spirit of the Congregation, itself founded on faith, humility, charity and self-denial.

In conclusion, as Pope Francis so aptly says, *“meekness is capable of winning over hearts, saving friendships and many other things besides. There is no earth more beautiful than the heart of others. There is no finer territory to attain than that of the peace found again with a brother or sister. And this is the earth to be inherited through meekness!”*<sup>9</sup>

## **Brothers in Jesus Christ**

*“Just as a human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single unit because all these parts, though many, make one body, so it is with Christ. In the one*

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<sup>8</sup> Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), *Rejoice*, n°1.

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience, February 19, 2020.

*Spirit we were all baptised, Jews as well as Greeks, slaves as well as citizens, and one Spirit was given to us all to drink” (1 Co 12, 12-13).*

Paul highlights the communion that actually exists between the members of the body. In Jesus Christ, all of us, Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free men, are one body. Likewise, in our Congregation or our communities, there are no longer any Africans, Europeans, Asians, Oceanians, or Americans, because we are all Brothers (Mt 23: 8). Henceforth, there are no more young Brothers, older Brothers, Brothers in charge of the school or Superior, because we are all members of a single body called the Congregation.

We have received this wonderful gift of fraternity from the Trinity, that is to say from God who is Father, Son and Spirit. In fact, *“So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”* (Gn 1, 27). This gift has a triple implication for fraternal living in community.

Trinitarian life is basically a relational life, the heart of which is **communion**. To say that we are created in the image of God amounts to affirming that our first vocation consists in developing a life of relationships based on a double communion: the first, vertical, with God; and the second, horizontal, with our brothers. The aim of our life as **Brothers in community** is to succeed, with the grace of God, to live as sons of the same Father and as brothers of Jesus.

Trinitarian life also reminds us that our vocation is a call to **fraternity**. Vatican Council II affirms: *“Man, by his very nature, is a social being, and without relationships with others, he can neither live nor develop his qualities”*.<sup>10</sup> In other words, self-realization is not achieved in isolation, but in fraternal life in community. To educate us in this fraternity, God offers us the pedagogy

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<sup>10</sup> Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n°12, 4.

of charity which consists in loving others with free and disinterested love: the more we love each other, the more we educate ourselves to being-brothers-together.

The Trinity finally teaches us that all confreres have the right to **respect**. Etymologically, the term "respect" (from the Latin *re-spectare*) means to esteem, admire, evaluate, in the sense of measuring, assigning a value, maintaining the right distance. Indeed, everyone is worthy of esteem and admiration because he/she is created in the image of God. The experience of this respect presupposes a whole spirituality which consists in considering the Brother as another self, therefore a privileged theological place where one learns to love God.

### **Received in inheritance**

*“Nor is the body to be identified with any one of its many parts. If the foot were to say, ‘I am not a hand and so I do not belong to the body’, would that mean that it stopped being part of the body? If the ear were to say, ‘I am not an eye, and so I do not belong to the body’, would that mean that it was not a part of the body?” (1 Co 12, 14-16).*

Saint Paul underscores the fundamental unity that binds the different members of the body together. This sense of belonging to a whole, therefore, bears the imprint of a heritage received and assumed. There is a membership that transcends the singularities and specificities of each member. *“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Rom 8: 16-17).*

Inherited fraternity leads us on the **path of friendship**. In fact, Jesus, the elder Brother, no longer calls us servants but friends (Jn 15:15). More than a title or an appellation, in so doing, Jesus introduces us into his intimacy: everything he hears from

his Father, he makes known to us. To remain his friend, he invites us to do what he commands.

Like Jesus, as our Rule reminds us, our friendship must be free and be expressed *"unequivocally in prudence, clarity, simplicity and respect for others"* (D 39). Thus, we will become real fellow travelers helping our Brothers to forge ahead on the path of a happier life.

The fraternity offered by the Lord Jesus proposes the **pedagogy of traveling with**. As he once did for the discouraged disciples, disappointed by the death of their Master, the Risen Lord continues to join us on our different journeys to Emmaus to warm our hearts, explain the Scriptures and share the bread with us (Lk 24, 13-35). He dares take the first step of fraternity by listening to us so that we can communicate to him our deepest feelings. Becoming our traveling companion, he helps the truth come to light. Then, *"by allowing us to tell"*, in this beautiful expression of Martin Heidegger, Jesus manages to give breath and meaning to what we have experienced. Finally, having arrived at our Emmaus and in response to our invitation, Jesus, the elder Brother, enters to stay with us. This hospitality provokes a new departure towards the community of Jerusalem where Brothers are waiting for us.

The fraternity that we have inherited offers us the **methodology of service**. Just before his death and resurrection, the Lord, during a meal, gets up from the table, removes his garment, takes a cloth which he ties around his waist, pours water into a basin and begins to wash the feet of his apostles (Jn 13: 1-17). At the end of this symbolic action which foreshadows his life given up for us, Christ invites his brothers to follow his example: *"Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet"* (Jn 13:14). Washing each other's feet then becomes the fraternity service methodology. In other words, the more we learn to serve, to wash each other's feet, the more we become Brothers.



## Rich for diversity

*« If your whole body was just one eye, how would you hear anything? If it was just one ear, how would you smell anything? Instead of that, God put all the separate parts into the body on purpose. If all the parts were the same, how could it be a body? As it is, the parts are many but the body is one. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I do not need you', nor can the head say to the feet, 'I do not need you' » (1 Co 12, 17-21).*

Paul emphasizes the complementarity of the different members for the proper functioning of the body. Each organ has its own partition to play: the eyes cannot replace the ears, nor the hands take the place of the feet. Each member, therefore, has its importance. It is the synchronization of the many that ensures the smooth running of the whole.

In Mennaisian term, the being-brothers-together must also be spelled out in diversity if we want our different communities to function harmoniously as a body. The fraternity is this diversity when, like in a family, we learn to watch with delicate attention over the confreres who need it most: the elderly, the sick, the young. This thoughtfulness is called charity, fraternal communion, proximity. *“What gives me the greatest pleasure is knowing that charity reigns among you. This intimate and truly fraternal union will be your strength and your happiness: keep it like a treasure”*.<sup>11</sup> As in a family, we learn interpersonal skills which give priority to brotherly love and mutual help.

The community is rich diversity when, as in a hospital, we are these doctors who look after our Brothers with the oil of consolation and mercy, the balm of solidarity and charity, the fragrance of tenderness and sweetness. *“Your ministry must always be a ministry of mercy and charity; besides, you gain nothing by*

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<sup>11</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, to Brother Hervé, April 13, 1843.

*harshness.*"<sup>12</sup> Thus, our fraternities are invited to be, in the beautiful expression of Pope Francis, field hospitals which treat wounds and which warm hearts by proximity and friendliness. This aspect was also recalled by our last General Chapter which exhorted us to "*build communities of welcome, mutual forgiveness, healing of wounds and profound fraternal communion ... to be islands of mercy in an ocean of indifference*".<sup>13</sup>

Communities are rich diversity when, like bakers, we offer our Brothers the *bread of affection* by knowing how to show our love and our compassion, the *bread of acknowledgment* by learning to speak well of them, and the *bread of security* by offering them the protection they need to grow and thrive. Our communities are therefore called to become homes where the bread of friendship, sweetness and peace is distributed, for the happiness of all.

Communities are rich diversity when, as in the Church, we apply ourselves to lend each other mutual support to go to God, when we rejoice at the happiness of others and when we share the pain of those who suffer.

*"Let brotherly love reign among all members of the same community; let everyone be happy with the joy of others, suffer from their sorrows; and let all lend themselves to go to God and accomplish his work, mutual support, avoiding contention, rivalries, secret jealousies, derisive words, everything that hurts and alters charity."*<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, Pope Francis forever reminds us "*to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves*".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, to Brother Arthur, November 13, 1846.

<sup>13</sup> General Chapter 2018, n° 13.

<sup>14</sup> Rule of 1835.

<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exultate*, n° 14.

## Against the current

*“What is more, it is precisely the parts of the body that seem to be the weakest which are the indispensable ones; and it is the least honourable parts of the body that we clothe with the greatest care. So our more improper parts get decorated in a way that our more proper parts do not need. God has arranged the body so that more dignity is given to the parts which are without it” (1 Co 12, 22-24).*

The Apostle Paul draws our attention to a reality in our daily life. In general, we give more importance to the most fragile members of our body and we take great care of them. Is not this wisdom full of common sense also **the logic of the Gospel**? This is what Mary sings in the Magnificat: The Lord *“overthrows the powerful from their thrones, he raises the humble; he fills the hungry with good things, sends the rich away empty”* (Lk 1, 52-53). It’s the world upside down!

The fraternity received as an inheritance is above all evangelical, that is to say, it defends and protects **the weakest**. It knows how to raise those who fall. It avoids extinguishing the wick that still smokes and breaking the crushed reed. It lends its voice to the voiceless. For Pope Francis, listening to the cry of the poor is a first step in fidelity to the Gospel. In this sense, it provides us with two criteria to help us discern whether we are living a gospel-like fellowship. The first is to check if we allow ourselves to be moved by the misery and the cry of the poor. The second criterion invites us to assess our capacity to identify with the poor by avoiding daily waste and by teaching him to fish instead of giving him a fish every day.

*Are we touched to the core by all forms of poverty knocking on our doors? Do we hear the cry of all our brothers, of all the hungry who call for help and who ask for support, assistance and protection? How do we express our solidarity with them?*

The evangelical fraternity to which we are summoned strives to live the preferential option for the most deprived. It's not about *doing things for them*; it's about developing *a new way of being concerning them*. What does this mean? Two forms of presence or better still two ways of being are to be favored here. The first is to **see with new eyes**. In fact, we have more to receive from the poor than we have to offer them. We must allow ourselves to be evangelized by them. "*We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.*"<sup>16</sup> The second way of being invites us to **develop loving attention** to them. "*Only on the basis of this real and sincere closeness can we properly accompany the poor on their path of liberation.*"<sup>17</sup>

The fraternity that the Gospel proposes exhorts us to know how to take care of. We are invited to pay particular attention to three main categories of frailties. What can we do for our brothers and sisters, victims of human trafficking? How can we be present to street kids who ask us for bread? How do we take care of creation so that we bequeath a healthier planet to the younger generations? Our last General Chapter also calls us to be "*Brothers of the young and the poor, Brothers of creation*".<sup>18</sup>

### **In solidarity with**

*"And that there may not be disagreements inside the body, but that each part may be equally concerned for all the others. If one part is hurt, all parts are hurt with it. If one part is given special honour, all parts enjoy it"*  
**(1 Co 12, 25-26).**

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<sup>16</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n° 198.

<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis, *Ibid.*, n° 199.

<sup>18</sup> General Chapter 2018, n° 13.

Saint Paul emphasizes the intrinsic solidarity that connects the different members of the body. Suffering is shared, as are joys and honours. What a great pedagogy to learn to journey together, to join hands to forge ahead and grow!

Learning to walk together is nothing more than trying to live a **synodal fraternity** every day. What does this mean? It is a fraternity that promotes participation and co-responsibility. No one is shoved aside or keeps out of the way. Thus, we learn to walk together, even if it means adopting someone else's rhythm. This is the only methodology for traveling with others. This is corroborated by this magnificent African proverb: "*If you want to go fast, walk alone. If you want to go far, walk with others*".

It is a fraternity based on **mutual listening** in which each brother has something to give and to receive. It is a way of seeking together, as if groping for, the will of God for our fraternal life in community here and now. This presupposes that I continually check the quality of my listening to others. A true act of humility! Doesn't learning to pay attention to others, because it demands a real conversion and leads to the will of God, first require kneeling in prayer?

Learning to walk together finally encourages **dialogue**, which is defined as conversation<sup>19</sup> to convert us to fraternity. Such an approach teaches us empathy which allows us to share the joy of those who are happy, the pain of those who suffer and the concerns of those who call for help. Wonderful relational pedagogy making it possible to be fellow travelers with our Brothers!

## **Having the colours of the rainbow**

*"Now you together are Christ's body; but each of you is a different part of it. In the Church, God has given the first place to apostles, the second to prophets, the third to teachers; after them, miracles, and after them the*

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<sup>19</sup> Bruno Cadoré, *Avec Lui, écouter l'envers du monde*, p. 191-195.

*gift of healing; helpers, good leaders, those with many languages. Are all of them apostles, or all of them prophets, or all of them teachers? Do they all have the gift of miracles, or all have the gift of healing? Do all speak strange languages, and all interpret them? Be ambitious for the higher gifts" (1 Co 12, 27-31).*

The Apostle Paul introduces the Corinthians to the different ministries and charisms in the Church, each one of them ordained to the good of the whole body. These are beautiful colours that bring out the splendor of the rainbow. Each shade is lovely, vibrant, different from the next. The whole gives us a wonderful message of inclusion and cohesion. This shows how wonderful diversity can be.

So, let's welcome this fraternity in the colours of the rainbow. It is a gift of the Spirit that flourishes and that instills beauty, dynamism and unity in diversity into our Congregation.

Depending on the country, the rainbow announces rain or sun. Isn't spring just around the corner? Doesn't the sun foreshadow the end of winter?

The promised rain will certainly bless our fraternal life in community, and the anticipated sun will surely make our communities happier, cheerier and more open to God's mercy.

## CHAPTER II

# SHARING THE GIFT OF FRATERNITY

*In simplicity and joy, the Brothers willingly share what they are, what they do and what they have. Although they have not chosen their confreres, they try to know and love them with the heart of Christ. Through self-denial and the generous gift of self, they gradually build community (Rule of Life, C 37).*

What a magnificent and comprehensive roadmap our Rule of Life gives us for our fraternal life in community! Sharing what we are! Sharing what we do! Sharing what we have! Seeking to know and love each other with all the affection of the heart of Christ! Building the community day after day!

Aren't we tempted to say it's too nice to be real? And yet, the grace of God is ready to enhance our efforts if we accept to truly open our hearts and our hands to share the gift of fraternity with those who are given to us as fellow travelers. "*Without me, the Lord reminds us, you can do nothing*" (Jn 15: 5).

In this chapter, the text of the Acts of the Apostles (**Acts 2, 41-47**) will serve as a guide for our reflection. The first Christian community really knew how to share the gift of fraternity that it first received from the Lord. "*The life of that community and, even more, the experience of complete sharing with Christ lived out by*

*the Twelve, have always been the model to which the Church has looked whenever she has sought to return to her original fervour and to resume with fresh evangelical vigour her journey through history.*"<sup>20</sup>

## **Faithfully following the example of the First Christians**

*"Those who accepted his message were baptized. That very day about three thousand were added to their number. These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. The many miracles and signs worked through the apostles made a deep impression on everyone. The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common" (Acts 2, 41-44).*

For the first Christian community, sharing the gift of fraternity automatically implied a fourfold fidelity. In other words, the more they participated in community prayer and the breaking of the bread, the more the first Christians became brothers and sisters and became attached to the teaching of the Apostles. The more they lived in fraternal communion and were faithful to community formation, the more they experienced the importance of prayer and of the Eucharist. This back-and-forth and integral loyalty was really the source of their influence: "*See how they love one another*".<sup>21</sup>

### **1- Ongoing formation**

Sharing the gift of fraternity is learning to be *diligent to the teaching of the Apostles*. What does this mean? He who calls us to be sent out wants us to become **a community of disciples** at the Master's school. In this sense, "*Each individual is called to let himself or herself be touched, educated, provoked, and enlightened by*

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<sup>20</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, n° 41.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. The testimony of non-Christians of the time about Christians, reported by Tertullian, 155-220 AD.



*life and by history, by what he or she proclaims and celebrates, by the poor and excluded, and by those near and far.*"<sup>22</sup> In fact, it is a question of being formed, fashioned and shaped by daily life, by the community, by one's Brothers, by prayer, by the apostolic mission, in joy, in tears, in success or failure. In other words, *"life is either permanent formation or permanent frustration, and there it deteriorates and impoverishes us"*.<sup>23</sup> Don't many crises in consecrated life have their origin in an impoverishment, even in the absolute absence of permanent formation? Don't we unfortunately often suffer from spiritual anemia, or from anorexia which threatens our vitality, our fertility and our dynamism?

*How do we participate in the peak formation moments organized by the Province or the District? Do our communities have a library that is continually renewed and encourages reading and formation? How much of the community budget is set aside for life-long learning: buying books, subscribing to magazines and others?*

Sharing the gift of fraternity also means learning **to train together** and join hands to grow in grace and wisdom before God and before men (Lk 2, 52). In this way, the community becomes the place where everyone learns to be responsible for their own growth and that of others.

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<sup>22</sup> CICLSAL, *New Wine in new Wineskins*, n° 35c.

<sup>23</sup> Amadeo Cencini, *La formation permanente*, Maison générale de l'ordre cistercien, Rome, septembre 2003, p. 2.

*How do we use the community project to grow and to be formed together? Our Rule of Life asks us to devote "to spiritual reading, especially of Holy Scripture, at least two hours a week" (C 45). Are we loyal to this growth tool offered by our Rule? What can we do in community to help each other in this area? As part of mutual support, it would be good to include in the community timetable just one hour per week of ongoing formation. Thus, we could read and study together documents of the Church, of the Congregation. Giving ourselves a helping hand to grow together is a proven pedagogy for living fraternal charity in a practical and effective way. What is the quality of my community presence? How does the use of new information and communication technologies (mobile phone, internet, social networks) contribute to strengthening or weakening our fraternal ties?*

Sharing the gift of fraternity also amounts to imitating the attitude of Mary who meditates in her heart (Lk 2:19) and who strives daily to carry out the will of God. Ongoing formation, therefore, requires personal choices that can help cultivate interiority. It is in the silence of the night that the dew falls from the sky, fertilizing our earth so that it will produce abundant fruit. Thus, there can be no training without commitment or personal contribution. No one is educated against his will! It is therefore important *"that all consecrated persons be formed in the freedom to learn throughout life, in every age and season, in every human ambient and context, from every person and every culture open to be taught by any fragment of truth and beauty found around them."*<sup>24</sup>

*Have I made these moments of formation part of my personal project? If so, am I faithful to it?*

Lastly, formation means learning **to always start from Christ**, *"the firstborn of many brothers"*. Hence, formation is never over because it aims at the progressive appropriation of

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<sup>24</sup> CICLSAL, *Starting Afresh from Christ*, n° 15.

the feelings of the Son. It is a gestation process in which we are always beginners. Every day, God calls us to be permanently available which is none other than a call to daily conversion. Each morning, the Lord invites us to a change of heart, to give up our old wineskins and to allow ourselves to be educated, trained and accompanied. We allow ourselves to be educated when we accept the deep truth about our own self. We allow ourselves to be formed when we are open to the new identity that the Lord offers us. We allow ourselves to be accompanied when we manage to share with others our bread, our experience of God, our descent into hell, our weaknesses. In so doing, we gradually make our own the feelings of the Son: "*It is no longer I who lives, it is Christ who lives in me*" (Gal 2:20).

Ongoing formation, this fidelity to the teaching of the Apostles, is indeed the **living Water** which gives vitality to our fraternal life in community. Without it, we run the risk of being a tree that vegetates for lack of water. Will we have the audacity and the simplicity of the Samaritan woman to ask for the living Water (Jn 4: 1-42) which will restore our freshness and greenness? Can we hear, like the prophet Elijah on the way to Horeb, the voice of the Lord asking us to get up and eat because there is still a long way to go (1 K 19: 7)?

## **2- Experiencing fraternal communion**

The first Christians were *diligent to fraternal communion*. It was their way of being church, of converting to community life and joining hands in order to live as members of the one family of God. Inspired by their example, fraternal life in community becomes "*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.*"<sup>25</sup> One could even affirm that the book of the Acts of the Apostles was for the

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<sup>25</sup> CICALSAL, *Fraternal Life in Community*, n° 25.

first Christian communities a true rule of life. It provided them with guidelines for living fraternal communion on a daily basis.

a) First of all, being-brothers-together is a gift from the Most High that we must know how to **wait patiently for** together, in family, in the upper room, in prayer and in the company of Mary (Acts 1:13 -14). From God, we learn to receive our brothers as gifts that embellish our community life. The Lord who knows the hearts of people chooses those whom he wants for us as fellow travelers, like Matthias who completed the apostolic community (Acts 1, 24-25). Baptized in the Holy Spirit (Acts 2: 1-18), we become adepts at harmoniously speaking the language of love which brings together, which abolishes borders, and which establishes us as a community of brothers. As Saint Ambrose so aptly put it, inspired by the apostolic community, we now live by the "*sober intoxication of the Spirit*"<sup>26</sup> which makes us prophets of fraternity.

b) Living in fraternal communion means offering our brothers all the **support** they need to stand and walk in the footsteps of Jesus (Acts 3, 1-26). Thus, following the Apostles Peter and John, our communities are called to develop "*the art of accompaniment which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5). The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life.*"<sup>27</sup> It also involves sharing and solidarity which can be expressed in different ways: knowing how to give one's time to others, visiting a sick colleague, serving gratuitously. Like Philip who joins the Ethiopian and who accepts his invitation to ride alongside him in his chariot (Acts 8:31), to accompany is also to know how to journey with a colleague who wishes to go further in his friendship with Christ. All these small gestures and a thousand mutual attentions build a

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<sup>26</sup> Hymn of Saint Ambrosius for Lauds, Splendor paternae Gloriam.

<sup>27</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n° 169.

particular type of relationship between the Lord's disciples and make them experience the beauty and the sweetness of living together.

c) To experience fraternal communion, to use the strong expression of Pope Francis, is to become this "*field hospital*" which welcomes our sick brothers in the name of the Lord. Like the Apostle Peter, we are invited to approach their stretchers (Acts 5, 12-16) so that our proximity becomes "*'caress', healing, communicative of health, effusion of the tenderness of the Risen One who is bending over the sick and restores life, salvation and dignity*"<sup>28</sup>.

d) To build fraternal communion is to learn to grope for and seek the will of God together. To achieve this, we are invited, like the Apostles before the Sanhedrin (Acts 5, 26-39), to give priority to the will of God. Only what comes from God really contributes to building community life. It is better to obey God than to obey men! Only God's strength can give the courage and the audacity to forge ahead, notwithstanding the sufferings and the crosses that could stand in the way.

e) To achieve fraternal communion is to strive to discern together **in charity and truth** by listening to the Holy Spirit, as was the case at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15: 1- 20), with a view to resolving conflicts. From this synodal experience, our communities are called to be places of mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn, where people listen to each other, and everyone listens to the Holy Spirit, the "*Spirit of truth*" (Jn 14:17). Otherwise, our community meetings will become parliamentary sessions where the law of the majority, or of those who are able to impose themselves through their fine speeches, will prevail.

f) To live in fraternal communion is to know how to put oneself at the service of others in order to promote **communion**

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<sup>28</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience, August 28, 2019.

**and unity in diversity.** This is our *diaconal vocation* in our communities (Acts 6: 1-15), which helps maintain the balance between the service of the word and that of charity. Such harmony constitutes a real leaven which makes the community grow.

*How is co-responsibility and subsidiarity lived out in our communities? Are they a source of cohesion or of rivalry? How do we make ourselves servants of our Brothers in community? How do we learn to take care of our isolated, depressed colleagues who need affection and attention?*

g) To build fraternal communion is to accept, following the example of Paul, to welcome the grace of **conversion** (Acts 9: 1-30). Indeed, Paul let himself be taken by the hand by his fellow travelers in order to enter Damascus. Three days later, Ananias joined him to introduce him to the Christian fraternity: "*Brother Saul, he who sent me is the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here*" (Acts 9:17). Thereafter, when his life is threatened because of Christ, brothers accompany the new member of the community to Caesarea in order to protect him.

*Do we accept to let ourselves be taken in and protected by our Brothers? Do we dare to reach out to a stranger whom the Lord sends us to integrate into our fraternity?*

h) To live in fraternal communion is to be open to the **surprises of God** who teaches us to go beyond borders and to cross to the other shore, to look at the person and the intentions of his heart. Indeed, God makes Peter understand that he must let go the old self to welcome Corneille (Acts 10: 1-48) and to "*live the closeness, the style of life together, which transforms all interpersonal relationships into an experience of fraternity*".<sup>29</sup> It also refers to our ability to open doors to expand our space. A risky bet, of course, but it is the price to pay if we want to become a dynamic, joyful community, sensitive to the sufferings of men.

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<sup>29</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n° 87.

i) To achieve fraternal communion is to have an **open heart**, sensitive to God and welcoming to our brothers, as is Lydia's (Acts 16: 1-15). It is also learning to imitate the attitude of the jailer who receives and heals the wounds of the two apostles, and who then lets his joy overflow, henceforth to belong to the large family of God (Acts 16: 25-34).

j) To live in fraternal communion is to strive to make our communities **houses of the Gospel** and cenacles of fraternity, following the example of Paul's residence in Rome (Acts 28: 15-31). In the apartment he had rented, he welcomed everyone who wanted to know Jesus Christ. "*This home, open to all hearts that seek, is the image of the Church that, despite being persecuted, misunderstood and chained, never tires of welcoming each man and woman, with a maternal heart, in order to announce to them the love of the Father which became visible in Jesus.*"<sup>30</sup> It also involves learning to experience true ecumenical hospitality by recognizing the stranger for what he is: a brother in Christ. Finally, it is practicing the ministry of compassion which preserves from chilly indifference and inhumanity.

*What about our communities?*

### 3. Breaking the bread together

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke reports that the first Christians were *diligent in breaking the bread* (Acts 2:42). From the start, they attached great importance to the Eucharist because it was the source from which they drew strength and fidelity. This explains why historians remind us that at the time of the persecutions, believers gathered in various places in Rome to celebrate the Passover of the Lord. It was the bread that nourished and accompanied those who gave their lives to bear witness to Christ, allowing themselves to be "*food for the beasts*" and "*the wheat of God*".<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience, January 15, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Romans.

In the third century, fifty Christians from Carthage were arrested at the end of a Eucharistic celebration and the authorities of the time asked them to give up their participation in the Passover of the Lord. Emeritus, on behalf of all, replied: "*To deny the Eucharist is to deny Christ, and don't you know that Christians cannot live without the Mass*"<sup>32</sup>? But why such an attachment to the Eucharistic celebration? Early Christians understood the fundamental link between the Eucharist and their Christian identity. A formidable link expressed in the beautiful and significant affirmation of Father Henri de Lubac: "*The Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church*"<sup>33</sup>.

In this sense, the Second Vatican Council presented the Eucharist as **the source and summit of Christian life**. As a source, it nourishes and vivifies our fraternal communion<sup>34</sup> and as a summit, it reminds us that Jesus is the only road that leads to it. Furthermore, Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical "*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*", affirms with conviction that the Church lives by the Eucharist and that it "*brings to its perfection communion with God the Father, thanks to identification with the only Son by the action of the Holy Spirit*"<sup>35</sup>. A little further, the Pope recalls that the Eucharistic celebration "*creates communion and educates in communion*"<sup>36</sup>. Indeed, Saint Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11, 17-34), exhorts the Christians of that Church to be consistent with what they celebrate. Participation in the Eucharist, therefore, implies fraternal communion, reconciliation and forgiveness of offenses. For how can we celebrate the Eucharist together and present a pleasant offering to the Lord if I do not first reconcile with my brother who has something against me (Mt 5: 23-24)?

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<sup>32</sup> P. Guillaume de Menthière, Conference : « *L'Église fait l'Eucharistie, l'Eucharistie fait l'Église* », April 7, 2002.

<sup>33</sup> Fr. Henri de Lubac, *Méditation sur l'Église*, p. 78.

<sup>34</sup> Pope Francis, Querida Amazonia, n° 91-93.

<sup>35</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n° 34.

<sup>36</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Ibid.*, n° 40.



*How does my community live by the Eucharist today? How does the Eucharistic celebration help our fraternal communion? How do we live the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation in community?*

#### **4. Personal and community prayer**

The Acts of the Apostles mention the *attendance* and fidelity of the early Christians *to prayers*. Luke repeatedly portrayed the Apostles and the first Christians praying. Indeed, with a few women, including Mary, they gather and meditate waiting for the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). They invoke the Lord before the choice of Matthias (Acts 1, 23-25). Peter and John go up to the Temple for the afternoon prayer (Acts 3: 1). The first Christian community receives the Holy Spirit just at the end of a prayer (Acts 4: 31-32). All these scenes called to mind by the author of the Acts of the Apostles are like paintings aimed at stressing the importance which the first Christians attach to community prayer. Praying together strengthens fraternal ties.

In the long tradition of the Church and of the Congregation, prayer, whether personal or communal, is the source at which every Christian or every Brother must quench his thirst if he wishes to imitate the Master whose whole life has been a relationship of communion with the Father. *“Without prayer, says John Paul II, religious life has no meaning. It loses contact with its Source, it has no substance and it can no longer achieve its goal.”*<sup>37</sup> And our Rule of Life doesn't say anything else when it states:

*As religious in the service of the Church, the Brothers are, by vocation, men of prayer. Besides being a member of an apostolic community, the Brother is a unique person whom God calls by name to fulfil a role which no one else can assume. In response to God's call, the Brother, sustained by communal and personal prayer, quests for God in the very depths of his being. (Rule of Life, C42)*

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<sup>37</sup> Pope John Paul II, Speech to Religious in Washington, October 7, 1979.

In other words, our apostolic, religious and community fecundity depends on our fidelity to **personal and community prayer**.

Community and personal prayer, like the liturgy, maintains the flame of love within us, educates us in hope and nourishes our faith. Gradually, it introduces us to the Trinitarian communion and consequently strengthens our fraternal bonds, because we learn to celebrate our Father together. Therefore, being present and participating in spiritual exercises concretely translates my desire to share the gift of fraternity with those whom the Lord gives me as fellow travelers. Otherwise, I can easily become a simple tourist staying in a hotel that provides him with room and board.

*Am I present at community prayer: Lauds and meditation in the morning; Vespers and worship in the evening? What is the extent of my participation? What is the quality of my animation when I provide this community service? Am I able to get up early enough to be on time for Lauds?*

Many spiritual writers have repeatedly stressed the importance of personal prayer for growing into greater intimacy with the Lord and in close proximity with our Brothers. According to Cardinal Decourtray, "*meditation is the committed communion of presence, connivance and intimacy with the God of Jesus Christ*"<sup>38</sup>. Without the daily heart to heart with the Master, there is no holiness, still less knowledge of Christ and deep encounter with him: there is, therefore, no growth in fraternal communion. Each step we take towards Christ brings us closer to our Brothers. It is this important reminder that *Perfectae Caritatis* makes to consecrated persons: "*Drawing therefore upon the authentic sources of Christian spirituality, members of religious communities should resolutely cultivate both the spirit and practice of prayer. In the first place they should have recourse daily to the*

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<sup>38</sup> Jean Lafrance, *Notre Père, le don de l'oraison*, p. 99.

*Holy Scriptures in order that, by reading and meditating on Holy Writ, they may learn "the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ"*<sup>39</sup>. And how can we forget the article of the Rule of Life of 1825 which invites us to last and to persevere in prayer: "*Never shorten, under any pretext whatsoever, your meditation, because, of all your exercises, it is most necessary*"<sup>40</sup>.

*Do I prepare my prayer as I would if I were to meet an important person? Do I have at my disposal a missal, a Bible or any other medium that puts the Word of God that the Church offers me daily? Do I devote the thirty minutes requested by the Rule of Life to meditation? Or did I get into the habit of going to prepare for Mass during the time planned for personal a heart to heart with Christ? Or do I use part of that time to go to church for the Eucharist?*

Where our treasure is, there too is our heart! Let's learn to make meditation our treasure! May it truly become the pearl of our life, for the acquisition of which we are ready to sell everything (Mt 13, 45-46)!

## **Selling and sharing**

*"They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need" (Acts 4, 32).*

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke underlines the generosity of the first Christians who did not hesitate to dispose of all their possessions in order to share according to the needs of each one. If they sold everything, it was because they had discovered the real treasure which is Jesus. Thus, they wanted to imitate the One who did not even have a stone to lay his head on (Mt 8, 20) and live the beatitude of poverty after his example (Mt 5, 3; Lk 6, 20). The giving away of material goods was ordered to charity, sharing and solidarity: "*There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them,*

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<sup>39</sup>Vatican Council II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n°6.

<sup>40</sup> Rule of 1825.

brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need." (Ac 4, 34-35). It also demonstrated their deep brotherly fellowship: "The multitude of those who had become believers had one heart and one soul; and no one said that his goods belonged to him, but they had everything in common" (Acts 4:32).

In the Augustinian tradition, community life aims at having "one heart and one soul". To achieve this, it must help its members live a double detachment: the stripping of material goods and the stripping of self. In other words, our fraternal life in community, by virtue of our vow of poverty, involves the **sharing of goods**, which is charity lived in action, and **humility**, the other name for total self-giving. We therefore understand St. Augustine better when he says: "*We only approach God through charity. Now where there is charity there is peace; and where humility is, there is charity.*"<sup>41</sup>

In addition, Pope Francis reminds us that our vow of poverty also commits us to the path of **solidarity**: "*Poverty in love is solidarity, sharing, charity and is expressed in sobriety, in the search for justice and in the joy of the essential*"<sup>42</sup>. This is therefore the road to take if we wish the life of our communities to be marked by simplicity and fraternity which bring us closer to the One who wagered everything on the only true wealth: his communion with the Father.

**Our vow of poverty** also urges us to assume our own vulnerability, otherwise it will be impossible for us to be close to those who call for help. We are also committed to going as far as possible in sharing the sufferings and sorrows of our brothers. This invitation from Christ to accept our vulnerability should challenge our community experience of the vow of poverty.

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<sup>41</sup> Saint Augustine, *Ubi humilitas, ibi caritas, la Joh*. Prologue.

<sup>42</sup> Pope Francis, International symposium on the management of ecclesiastical goods of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life at the service of humanity and the mission in the Church, March 8, 2014.

*Do we dare to experience the fragility that living together presupposes? Do we really put everything into the common purse: salary, allowances, donations, operating costs? Are there any of us who have access to more money than others? Is there a real sharing of resources and real solidarity between the different communities of the Province or District? Are there not communities in the Province or District which reap a surplus while others do not even have the basic necessities?*

The credibility of our consecrated life rests on our ability to live in coherence with our vow of poverty which is ordered to **charity, sharing, solidarity and fraternal communion.**

### **Every day, with one heart**

*“And they, continuing **daily with one accord** in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart” (Acts 2, 46).*

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke notes that the first Christians participate actively in the common life. When? *“Every day”*. And how? *“With one heart”*. By this expression, *“every day, with one heart”*, he intends to underline in a fine and subtle way the interior, daily and free adhesion of the first Christians at the invitation of the Master who brings together those he has chosen to be with him. It is the backbone on which fraternal life in community rests: all convened and obedient. When some of them will face persecution and be asked to stop gathering in the name of the Lord, they will without hesitation decide to obey God rather than men (Acts 5, 29).

Christian obedience introduces us into the large family of God. For he who listens to the Word of God and puts it into practice is for Christ *a brother, a sister, a mother* (Mt 12:50). Thus, fraternal life in community becomes the privileged place where we learn, united in mind and heart, to discern together the will of the Lord. As Saint Benedict states in his Rule, the obedience

that pleases God is that of a community of disciples who obey joyfully and willingly.

In a world marked by individualism and self withdrawal, our **vow of obedience** teaches us to travel together and to count on each other to move forward and to grow. On this path, the first step is listening because obeying is, etymologically, "**listening**" (*ob-oedire, ob-audire*). Therefore, we start to obey when we really listen to each other. Like Mary and Joseph, our obedience is fruitful and builds community when it opens us to total receptivity: here is the servant of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word (Lk 1:38).

The second place where our vow of obedience calls us to be is the community meeting where we strive together to seek unity of heart and of mind for the common good. The presence and active participation of each member of the community is essential. Being absent or participating uncaringly hurts the unity of the body. The stone that each Brother brings contributes to building the common house. In addition, for many years, General Chapters have repeatedly emphasized the importance of the **community project** as a pedagogy for learning to journey together.

*Has my community really joined this movement of the Congregation? How does our community project help us to lend mutual support to grow together? How, as a Major Superior, do I accompany the communities of my Province or of my District in the elaboration of their project?*

Our vow of obedience invites us to embark on the path of **responsibility**. Whoever can give the right answer at the right time shows he is responsible. Sometimes irresponsibility paralyzes us, blocks us and prevents us from venturing newness. This is confirmed by the testimony of Father Timothy Radcliffe, former Master of the Order of Dominicans:

*In my personal experience as Provincial, I have seen "the mystery of the responsibility disappear". ... A Provincial Chapter notices a problem and instructs the Provincial to deal with it and resolve it. A courageous decision must be made. He seeks the advice of the Provincial Council. The board instructs a commission to consider what needs to be done. They take two or three years to further clarify the data of the problem. Then they send the matter to the next Provincial Chapter, and so the cycle of irresponsibility continues.<sup>43</sup>*

Only responsible Brothers will help our communities to grow in fraternity and humanity. Let us dare, with courage and creativity, to live our vow of obedience by placing it at the service of building the common home.

### **In all simplicity of heart**

*"Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with **glad and simple hearts**" (Acts 2, 46).*

This passage from the Acts of the Apostles alludes to the meals that the early Christians shared with "*simplicity of heart*". In the biblical tradition, the expression "*simplicity of heart*" refers to the notions of purity, sincerity, truth, righteousness and fidelity (Mt 5, 8, Col 3, 22, 1 Co 5, 8 and 2 Co 3, 11). Furthermore, in primitive ascetic literature, the term "*Yahid* – coming from the Syriac language, very close to Hebrew as well as from the Aramaic spoken by Jesus – which designates the ascetic person or the monk, signifies **radical simplicity**, that is, the absence of any division in the heart of man. Many spiritual Fathers have associated it to the vow of chastity which claims to give one's all to God,

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<sup>43</sup> Timothy Radcliffe, *Lettre : Donner sa vie pour la mission*, Sainte Sabine, Rome 1994.

to love him with all one's heart, with all one's soul and with all one's strength.

Our Rule of Life reminds us that our **vow of chastity** flourishes in fraternal life in community. To achieve this, "*the Brothers live together in genuine fraternal love, characterized by thoughtfulness, mutual trust and unobtrusive concern for others.*" (D 40). A Brother who does not find this warm presence and this mutual support in community will probably seek them elsewhere, which is not without danger for his commitment to follow Christ more closely in consecrated celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom. Community life is only strengthened if it is cared for, and community recreation is a great way to consolidate these bonds between us. Let's not be afraid to spend time together, freely. The happiness of being together is a key to everyone's growth, loyalty and perseverance. Is not fraternity both our **vocation** and our **mission**?

Our vow of chastity also introduces us into the dynamics of **sharing**. It is not only a question of breaking the bread of our minds but also, and above all, that of our hearts. Concretely, our communities are called to be places where we learn to comfort those who cry, to protect the wick which still smolders or the reed which is about to break, to give courage when the heart hesitates or is divided. In doing so, the distressed will find the strength he needed to start again, the friendship he lacked to go on cherishing the beauty of consecrated celibacy, and the esteem he had lost to still believe in his fundamental option.

Our vow of chastity also leads us to experience **friendship**, a factor of stability for our affectivity. In fact, fraternal love fosters equality. Among friends, there is no place for domination or manipulation. Such friendship educates us in the Trinitarian pedagogy: respect, equality, wonder and fruitfulness.

*How do we experience prudence and transparency in community?  
How do we help each other to be faithful to our vow of chastity?*



## With glad hearts

*“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with **joy and sincere hearts**, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people” (Acts 2, 46-47).*

“*With joy*” is the expression chosen by Saint Luke to describe the joyful atmosphere in which the meals of the first Christians take place. But here, the joy in question is not limited to fraternal feasts. It accompanies and permeates the whole of their daily life. Several scenes from the book of the Acts of the Apostles corroborate this claim. The Samaritans express their joy at the many healings carried out by the disciples (Acts 8, 8). The eunuch who has just been baptized by Philip continues his joyful journey (Acts 8:39). The prison guard “*rejoices with all his people for believing in God*” (Acts 16:34) And what better confirmation can we find than the conclusion of Paul's address to the elders of Ephesus: “*There is more joy to give than to receive*” (Acts 20:35)?

**Christian joy**, fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5, 22), is this shared happiness, this smile which encourages, this gesture which reassures and which calms, this thoughtfulness which values and which gives confidence. In this sense, Mary lets her joy burst in the Magnificat for the marvels that the Lord has accomplished in her life (Lk 1:47). John the Baptist trembled in Elizabeth's womb during the Visitation (Lk 1, 41). The Father rejoices and celebrates the return of his prodigal son (Lk 15,24).

Our last General Chapter affirms with conviction that the witness of a joyful and happy community (CG 2018, no. 6) is decisive in the context of a pastoral ministry of vocations that intends to be attractive and meaningful. In fact, the men and women of today, especially the young, are sensitive to fraternal love lived in community since it increases tenfold our capacity to rejoice and be happy for the good of others. They are attracted

to the joy that radiates from our communities, while sadness and gloom make them flee. Pope Francis continually reminds us of the importance of testimony for our future:

*“A joyless fraternity is a dying fraternity. A community rich in joy is a true gift from the Most High, granted to brothers and sisters who know how to ask for it, and who accept each other by committing themselves to fraternal life with confidence in the action of the Spirit.”<sup>44</sup>*

*How do I communicate my joy of being a Brother? Is it contagious? How does my community testify to the happiness of being-brothers-together? Can we paraphrase Pope Francis: wherever there are Brothers, there is always joy? It's the joy of newness, it's the joy of following Jesus, the joy that the Holy Spirit gives us!*

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<sup>44</sup> CICLESAL, *Rejoice*, n° 9.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **OFFERING THE GIFT OF FRATERNITY**

*“And who is my neighbour?”* the Doctor of the Law asks Jesus (Lk 10, 29) The dialogue revolves around what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus suggests that he should love God and his neighbour. Wishing to go a little further, the man questions Jesus on the identity of that neighbour. Jesus answers by telling him the parable of the good Samaritan which will be the common thread of this chapter.

*“Go, and you also, do likewise”* (Lk10, 37). The conclusion of this meeting reported by Luke is a sending off on a mission: Jesus invites the anonymous Doctor of the Law to offer the gift of fraternity to all whom he meets on the way.

What if this person whose name is not specified represents each one of us? Each of our communities? The Congregation? What does our last General Chapter ask of us, if not "to be missionaries of fraternity"?<sup>45</sup>

#### **The good Samaritan's example**

*But the man was anxious to justify himself and said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was once on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of brigands; they took all he had, beat him and then made off, leaving him half dead.*

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<sup>45</sup> General Chapter 2018, n° 22b.

*Now a priest happened to be travelling down the same road, but when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite who came to the place saw him, and passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion when he saw him. He went up and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He then lifted him on to his own mount, carried him to the inn and looked after him. Next day, he took out two denarii and handed them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and on my way back I will make good any extra expense you have." Which of these three, do you think, proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the brigands' hands?' 'The one who took pity on him' he replied. Jesus said to him, 'Go, and do the same yourself' (Lk 10, 29-37).*

If we wish to heed the call of Jesus who asks us to follow the good Samaritan's example, this parable invites us to develop eight attitudes which do not primarily require a know-how, but above all social skills, or better still a "knowing how to be". After contemplating each attitude of the Samaritan, let's allow ourselves to be questioned and encouraged by God about our own personal and community attitude.

### **The good Samaritan sees**

The priest, the Levite and the Good Samaritan saw the injured man by the roadside, but what do the first two do? They ignore him, they avoid the person in need while the stranger approaches him. In fact, there are two ways of looking: the first, which leads to turn away from, and the second, which invites to turn towards and get close. The first one judges, condemns and labels, following the example of the priest and the Levite; the other encourages to draw nearer and see what's good in every person. This second way of looking opens our **eyes** "to see the

*miseries of the world, the wounds of so many brothers and sisters deprived of dignity", our ears "to hear their cry calling for help" and our hands to shake their hands and draw them to us "so that they feel the warmth of our presence, of friendship and of brotherhood"*<sup>46</sup>.

The Brother or the community that manages to welcome what is good in each person that the Lord places on their way is this "**watchman**", this "**caretaker**", this "**prophet**" who knows how to anticipate by the warmth of his presence, by his friendship and by his fraternal love what could hurt the self-esteem of others.

*Learning to look at others kindly and positively* is a seed of fraternity that the world is in great need of today. It will produce timely fruit. Let's not hesitate to sow abundantly these beautiful seeds all around us. They will change us, and they will transform our different places of life and mission. In this way, we will become prophets of brotherly love.

*How many confreres, parents of pupils, members of the educational team, children and young people need our gaze which lifts up, values and brings back to life? Are we able to recognize and celebrate the talents of the people we live with? Can we congratulate others and thank them for a service rendered? Or are we inclined to always see the half-empty glass?*

## **The good Samaritan sympathizes**

The good Samaritan "*was seized with compassion*" (Lk 10, 33). The state of the injured man by the wayside cannot leave this traveler, who has eyes to see, indifferent. He is touched deep inside and puts himself in the shoes of the person who calls for help through his extreme distress. His **compassion** makes him anticipate his brother's call for help. This attitude of the heart saves him from indifference and gives him passion, daring, zeal and dynamism when it comes to relieving and helping others.

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<sup>46</sup> Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, n° 15.

This is what Pope Francis affirms when he says that "*the Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love*"<sup>47</sup>. And the Church is compassionate and merciful because it is fundamentally a mother.

Jean-Marie de la Mennais was touched to the depths by the distress of the children of Brittany, like Jesus who allowed himself to be overwhelmed by the poor and the little ones of his time, and as the heart of God quivered before his people in slavery in Egypt. Thus, the experience of compassion of Jean-Marie de la Mennais became the cradle where our Congregation was born. "*When Father Jean-Marie de La Mennais saw the idle children running the streets, unattended, exposed to all the dangers ... he felt sorry for them. But how can this evil be remedied? Only one way: open schools. How, on the other hand, find masters, already so rare? Train them: that is what he decided to do in 1818*"<sup>48</sup>.

The Brother or the community that exercises compassion becomes a "**mother**" who succeeds in guessing the most subtle needs of his colleagues, Lay Mennaisians, children and young people, in order to discreetly respond to them. Everyone is aware of the importance of the mother to the stability of a family and to the harmonious growth of children. The confreres who have this gift of empathy which allows them to be compassionate and merciful are truly precious in our communities. They represent a real blessing for children and young people.

*Learning to sympathize* is to daily exercise this cordial, affectionate and respectful attitude which heals, mends, reassures, accompanies, and which makes it possible to offer to others the necessary presence they need to grow and to walk at their own pace.

*How do we build this compassionate and merciful community that generates life and fruitfulness for others? Are we faithful to the heritage of compassion received from our Founders?*

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<sup>47</sup> Pape Francis, *Ibid.*, n° 10.

<sup>48</sup> Brother Maurice Chotard and Roger Rigot, *Le Corsaire de Dieu*, n° 54.

## The good Samaritan draws near

"*The good Samaritan drew near*" (Lk 10,34). In the Bible, when God draws close to man, it is to reassure him, protect him and offer him the security necessary for his growth; by approaching his children like a good father, God allows them to feel his tenderness. The proximity of the Samaritan is that of the father who comes out of his comfort to give himself up to others. This attitude requires real availability which leads to interact with, give time to, be acquainted with, pay a visit to, show affection and listen to. All this means risking everything and getting one's hands dirty. Being close finally refers to the attention paid to the poorest and most fragile in order to be able to really share their sorrows and their joys, their sadness and their hopes.

The Brother or the community that practices being close to confreres, children and young people, Lay Mennaisians and educators is this tender, compassionate and merciful "**father**" who offers them the security they so much need to grow and flourish. Many people around us hope for this closeness which empathizes, reassures, protects and makes creative.

*Drawing closer* is applying the methodology of proximity on a daily basis. Let's learn to make ourselves close to those who are injured by the wayside and who call for help. This is where the Lord invites us to serve, love and protect him.

*How do we respond to this expectation personally and in community? How can we today become a community of good Samaritans for those who are close to us?*

## The good Samaritan heals wounds

The good Samaritan "*heals the wounds*" (Lk 10: 34) of the man who was ill-treated by bandits on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. By such a gesture, this man from Samaria acts as a doctor who cares, who mends, who heals wounds. This is the great intuition of Pope Francis when he compares the Church to a field hospital after a battle, the main mission of which is "*to heal*

*the wounds, to assuage them with the oil of consolation, to bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care*"<sup>49</sup>. Many are injured and left by the wayside. This is the greatest urgency for us today: being able to heal the wounds of our **Brothers in community**, of the children and young people who are entrusted to us by the Lord. They are on our doorsteps: there is no point in looking elsewhere.

The Brother or the community that strives to care for their injured Brothers, children and young people, Lay Mennaisians and educators with the oil of consolation, mercy, solidarity and attention becomes that "**doctor**" who restores their health and vitality.

*Healing wounds* is striving to live out this compassion that allows us to take care of the most fragile and to find global and creative responses to the fragility of the children and young people who knock on our doors. It is the best methodology for mending and healing. "*A school is a hospital; all young people are more or less infirm ... Be merciful to them as God is to you*"<sup>50</sup>.

*How can we today make our communities field hospitals that treat and relieve suffering? How can we be the doctors who take care of all those who have been injured in life, especially children and young people who call for help?*

## **The good Samaritan pours oil and wine**

The good Samaritan heals the wounds of the man attacked by the bandits "*by pouring oil and wine into them*" (Lk 10, 34). The urgency of reaching out to those in need presses him to put his plans aside and break the journey. His concern for the life of those who are threatened brings out the best in him and makes him **pour oil and wine** on the wounds of the half-dead man. But pouring oil and wine is the mission of the One who stands among

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<sup>49</sup> Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, n° 15.

<sup>50</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, Letter to Brother Henri-Marie, November 2, 1851.



us as the One who serves. The oil symbolizes the anointing of tenderness and the wine, the joy of self-giving. Thus, the good Samaritan tenderly serves his brother and gives himself completely and joyfully to his neighbor. This is the fundamental mission of the baptized as well as that of the priest.

The Brother or the community that serves those close to them with tenderness and joy becomes this "**priest**" who pours the oil of mercy and the wine of sanctification by the simple testimony of the total gift of self. It's the best way to serve life and protect it when it's threatened. Thus, oil and wine constitute the precious perfume poured out, a pure act of love and life given up to love and serve life (Jn 12: 3).

*Pouring oil and wine* is to live daily this Eucharistic tenderness where the love of God poured out in our hearts by the Spirit becomes an abundant source of life for those who cross our paths. This anointing of tenderness restores and heals all it touches, makes fertile all that is sterile, softens all that is stiff, warms all that is cold, fortifies all that is fragile.

*Are we, by the grace of God, able to respond to our world that eagerly awaits such fraternal servants, capable of giving their lives for others so that they may live?*

## **The good Samaritan puts the man up on his own mount**

The good Samaritan "*puts up*" the half-dead man "*on his own mount*" (Lk 10: 34). In fact, he agrees to **take upon himself** his burden, his wounds. He sets out with him, accepting the fatigue and the risks of the journey. He shares his sufferings. He gives his life and his time out of love and compassion. *Putting on his own mount* is the attitude of the Good Shepherd who cares for the injured sheep. Such is the service of the humble and compassionate brotherly love.

The Brother or the community that knows how to carry the sufferings of their Brothers, children and young people, Lay

Mennaisians and all the wounded in life is the "good pastor" who gives his life out of love for his sheep.

*Taking on one's mount* is to choose positive solidarity which consists in helping others to carry their burden in order to build a fraternity where one learns to join hands to forge ahead together. It is also allowing the wick that still smokes to become a light that provides warmth and hope to those who approach it. It's finally giving others the help they need to keep growing.

*Do we respond with generosity and availability to the many people who expect us to replicate these good Samaritan gestures? How do we lend each other mutual support in shouldering our weaknesses and carrying our burdens together when it comes to offering the gift of fraternity to those in our charge?*

## The good Samaritan takes into an inn

The good Samaritan "*leads*" the wounded man "*to an inn*" (Luke 10, 34). Leading, guiding is the gesture of the pedagogue who helps to go out, to grow, to take flight, to set out on the way, to overcome an obstacle. Thus, like a wise educator, the good Samaritan points out the road of growth and of healing to this wounded man. He also accompanies him on this path by putting himself at his service and relieving his suffering. The Good Samaritan's "*pedagogical attitude*" is based on a triple conviction that could be called a profession of faith. He agrees to accompany him to the hostel. It's his *methodology* to tell him in the first place that he trusts him: to believe in someone is to help him grow. Then, it is his *strategy* to confirm his hope in his recovery: by doing so, he allows him to see his future in a different light. Finally, his approach shows him his love: thus, he tells him in a very tangible way that "*the measure of love is to love without measure*"<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> Saint Augustine, start of the 5<sup>th</sup> s., Sermon.

The Brother or the community that accompanies the growth of their Brothers, children and young people, Lay Mennaisians and members of the educational team is this “**pedagogue**” who puts them back on their feet for a new departure, for a new page, for a new start.

*Taking in an inn* is learning to get in step with of our fellow traveller. It is also knowing “where he’s at” so as to help him forge ahead.

*How does our community support the growth of those entrusted to it? How does the community express its confidence, hope and love to them?*

### **The good Samaritan takes care of**

The good Samaritan “*takes care of him*” (Lk 10,34). Indeed, this Samaritan offers his help to this stranger whose state arouses pity and compassion in him. But he does so selflessly. This is the distinctive feature that the Christian faith provides. In this sense, if someone cares for others and waits for others to do the same for them, they do nothing more than pagans do (Mt 5: 46-47). Also, according to the logic of the Gospel, taking care consists in serving the little ones, the weak and the last ones freely. Concretely, it is giving food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty in the name of Christ; it is welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked and visiting the sick or those in prison (Mt 25, 31-46). Just as the gardener takes care of the plants on his land, so the good Samaritan offers the injured man by the roadside everything he needs for a fresh start.

The Brother or the community that knows how to take care of their Brothers, children and young people, Lay Mennaisians and all those whom the Lord places on their path is this “**gardener**” who cultivates roses to embalm and embellish his fraternity, his Province or his District, his Congregation and the Church.

*Taking care* is to promote the ecology of those who require **respect, protection and fraternal love.**

*How does our community respond to its vocation to care?  
How does it serve the little ones, the weak and the last ones?  
How does it apply the child protection protocol of the Province or District, of the Congregation?*

## CONCLUSION

At the end of this reflection, relying on the Our Father, the prayer that educates us to fraternity, I would like us to entrust to the Lord our life as **Brothers in community**. *“If the Lord does not build the house, the builders work in vain; if the Lord does not guard the city, in vain the guards watch”* (Ps 126, 1).

**God, our Father,**  
you offer us the gift of fraternity:  
we thank you for calling us  
to be *Brothers in community*.

**May we sanctify your name**  
by learning to lend each other mutual support  
to walk together towards you.

**May your kingdom come**  
when we are trying to become,  
in community and around us,  
artisans of peace, justice, solidarity,  
of joy and of fraternity.

**Help us accomplish your will**  
by founding our fraternal life on You Alone  
and abandoning ourselves to your Providence.

**Give us this day the bread**

of fraternal communion,  
of ongoing formation,  
of fidelity to the Eucharist,  
of personal and community prayer,  
so that we don't fall down along the way.

**Teach us to forgive our Brothers**

like you yourself forgive us,  
in order to make our communities  
places of welcome, forgiveness  
and healing of wounds,  
islands of mercy  
that our world so badly needs.

**Don't let us enter into temptation**

of individualism, jealousy, silence,  
sadness, resentment, slander, defamation,  
of everything that hurts people  
and hinders the fecundity of our lives  
as *Brothers in community*.

**Finally, deliver us**

from indifference,  
from the search for vain glory,  
from blindness, distrust,  
rigidity, comfort, fear,  
and from everything  
that prevents us from taking care of  
the smallest and the weakest.

**God alone in time!**

**God alone in eternity!**

**Amen!**

**Brother Hervé Zamor, s.g.**

**March 25, 2020**

**On the solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord.**