WHO ARE YOU?

Fraternal Life in Community Part 1

Over the course of a seminar given by Brother Herbert (2-9 April, 2013) on the topic of “Fraternal Life in Community,” Brother set the following question: “Who are you for people around you?” Most of the participants attempted to respond to the question ‘existentially.” But the question was quite turned on its head, and the exercise became far more demanding (and introspective) when we were asked more specifically: “Who are you?” (“Who do you think you are?”)

Ostensibly the question relies heavily on self-knowledge and on what others know or think of me. But further sharing and discussion among the group highlighted the significant aspects of information on self that my contemporaries are unaware of, and information about others of which I am unconscious. This question, to all intents and purposes might be seen in a totally superficial way, eliciting a simple and inconsequential spontaneous response, but the information that surfaces could also provoke admiration or even astonishment, for the questioner and as well as the one questioned. But as the original query takes into account the entire “spacio-temporal” dynamic of the individual, and every dimension of human person, the exercise presupposes an introspective process whose total objective of self-knowledge and revelation about self must necessarily be a life-time, and life long process.

Through his individuality and his humanity, Jesus himself emphasizes the importance of personal identity: “Who do people say that I am?” he asks of his disciples. The latter responded: some say you are John the Baptist; some others, Elias; others still, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” But did these “people” (Who do people say that I am ?) really know Jesus? They never lived with him. They were all “outsiders,” not one of his band of disciples. John the Baptist lived among his disciples; he was the one who had baptized Jesus. So, Jesus cannot be John the Baptist! Nor can he be Elias or one of the prophets. But Jesus wanting to pursue and broaden his learning exercise turned to his disciples and said: You who have been living with me and sharing my life, seeing my deeds and listening to my words, who do “you” say that I am? Peter, quite breathless with excitement blurted out: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!”

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1 Mt. 16, 16.
making this declaration Peter revealed an essential identity trait of Jesus. But in spite of his categorical statement can it truly be said that Peter really “knows” Jesus? Immediately following that magnificent moment of Peter’s extraordinary response to Jesus’ “simple” question ---a response that stirred the hearts of the apostles a boundless joy and faith in the messiahship of their Leader---Jesus immediately reveals to his disciples the untimely and shocking way in which his time with them is to end, in suffering, death, but also in his resurrection!

Yet again Peter takes the lead in reproaching Jesus for such “outlandish” language. What he says amounts to: You are the Son of God! Nothing will happen to you; God will protect you from anything like that. Peter spoke thus, because his “actual” knowledge of Jesus was really quite limited. Jesus, on the other hand, genuinely “knew” himself. He knew where he came from, who he was, and why he had come.
WHO ARE YOU? Fraternal Life in Community: Part 2

The desire to know God

Like men and women of every age who experience a desire to know God, we too desire to seek, cost what it may, to know who Jesus is. But often enough we tend to forget ourselves in that search. Now is the time to ask ourselves “Who are we? Who am I?” I who want to be a disciple, a seeker after Christ, who am I? I who am called to live fraternal life in community, who am I?

A deep exercise in subjectivity is required in order to discover self, because authentic self knowledge is fundamental to any seeking after a better way of living. To be sincere in this never-ending search for the Other, is tantamount to piercing through to the deepest and most intimate mysteries of a supernatural reality, that is, to know God. In our quest to know who God is, we would do well to remember this old Greek adage: “Come to know yourself and you will come to know both God and others.”

The question, “Who are you?” is in no way a type of psychological analysis, nor a philosophical exercise. Rather does it seek to stir the conscience in a quest for the complete human person, so as to be enabled to live in freedom and harmony with self, with God, and with our environment.

Knowing who and what we are makes us free and able to open ourselves to others. If we do not know ourselves, we will be unable to establish sound and reliable relationships with others. In other words, if we are ignorant of who we are we will not be coherent with ourselves nor be able to establish honest and open relations with other, and thus live in perfect harmony with our environment.

Every situation in life requires a clear of identity personal identity. Even Yahweh himself was not exempt from this reality, as is patently clear in His encounter with Moses. Before accepting his mission Moses asked of Yahweh, “Who are you?” And Yahweh replied, “I Am who Am.” (Ex. 3:14) The question “Who am I?” is fundamental for us brothers called to fraternal life in community. It is thoroughly rooted in the dynamic of our life, and focuses us as much on the strengths as on the weaknesses of the body that we form together. Let us begin by identifying a few dimensions of our life in order to establish some elements that might be useful to us in our efforts towards greater personal fulfillment, and for a better fraternal life in community.
WHO ARE YOU? Fraternal Life in Community : Part 3

Made in the image of God, we are gift to community

We are made in the image of God. This transcendent quality belongs to every human being: God Created us in his image: (Gen 1: 26-27). The words “image of God” refer to God Himself in his state of a being gifted with intelligence, love and will. But God is also “diverse”. We know him to be Trinitarian: “Let us make mankind in our image.” The words “Let us make” express at one and the same time diversity (because God is plural) and unity or oneness (because God forms a body). In reality we can only attempt to understand the image of God in Jesus Christ, perfect image of the Father.

“Who sees me, sees the Father. For I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” (Jn 14:8) Through his life Jesus showed us how we are made in the image of God. God dwells in us through his Spirit, who “translates” himself to us through gifts and talents so that we in turn may continue to express his love for humanity. Ours it is to offer without reserve all these talents and gifts to the service of our institute and our brothers in all gratuitousness, after the example of the One to whom we owe everything we have.

In imparting to us our dignity as his sons and daughters God has raised us to the level of the most precious of his creatures. His Spirit is bestowed upon us, and makes it possible for us to know Him and share in his designs for the world. Various talents have been given to each of us, not so as to compete with one another but so that we may be in congruity with the image of God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) who created all the marvels that human kind is able to enjoy today.

Ours it is to contemplate the Trinitarian communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit at work in creation, so as to discover ever more the mysterious depths of our human natures created in the image and likeness of God. The challenge for us is to be willing to open ourselves to welcome the differences in the other(s) --- gifts and talents--- so as to build community together? Will we be able to accept our limitations and unite our strengths so as to better appreciate and maximize the potential of whom and what we are? But the “communion” of our gifts and talents goes well beyond any hierarchical predisposition that might tend to leave us anxious or self-important. Such communion is achieved through a spirit of service for the sake of building fraternal life, and leads us on
the way of personal and community self-fulfillment, in which each brother is a gift for his community and for his brother.

This concept ought to spur each brother on to a greater sense of belonging to and accountability to the community to which he owes allegiance. Each brother must consider himself as the guardian of his local community, which he wishes to protect, preserve, and contribute to its well-being, etc. The life of every religious must be fundamentally rooted in its fraternal and community environment from which both the religious and the community draw their momentum for growth. And it is the fraternal *milieu* that constitutes the authentic and inexhaustible well-spring of energy, and the fruit of the synergy created by the self-offering of each member.

This is why no member must hesitate in giving his all to and for his local community, since the community works for the well-being of all. The more a person loves, the more that person is loved, the more one affirms the more one is affirmed and valued. The local community is built up constantly when it is lived out in a climate in which the brothers learn to affirm and appreciate one another. If a person feels that he is not valued for who and what he is, it is important for that person to take time to seek out what it is that creates an impediment to that necessary affirmation. It is not necessary to extraordinary to accomplish a great deal, nor does doing a lot of things make a person extraordinary.

Moreover, the beauty of religious life may clearly be seen in the simple generosity of its members. A mere gesture of openness to another in trust, a simple act of innocent teasing, is already a step towards closer brotherhood. The thing is that we need to be humble enough to discover in one’s brothers the living witness that they are of community and of a shared mission. To dare to seek out and open ourselves to the positive in the other is to experience the fullness of community.
WHO ARE YOU? Fraternal Life in Community : Part 4

Unity in diversity

With divine Wisdom and infinite knowledge the Creator desired to astound the world by the uniqueness of human nature. As Pythagoras would have it, “each person bears a different number.” Or every individual is a unique person. And it is due to this uniqueness that each of us is and considers ourselves different. And one is different in the entirety of one’s being, and this is a marvel of creation. Each being is different because each has a different story. And that unique and individual story, characterizes each person from conception to death. And it is at the very heart and core of our own story that we are called to live in community. That is to say that each one carries with him always and everywhere the marks of his past life. But it is equally true to say that the community to which we wish to belong, and that we want to be and feel an intrinsic part of, also has its own particular (hi)story. The Challenge is to make an honest reading of the community’s story, whilst one’s own personal story is still very much alive in one’s memory. The community’s story must be a means to understanding the present situation of both the individual and the community in order to better contend with the present and prepare for the future.

Human beings are also different culturally. For having developed in his own particular time and space, as a member of a distinct nation or race, with its traditions, values, life-style, and way of seeing and interpreting the world, every person has been shaped in such a way as to become different from those who do not share the same cultural heritage. Culture as an identifying characteristic is something quite precious, something to be born within self, in one’s body, mind, and spirit, in one’s attitudes and way of acting. I have my culture, you have yours, “they” have theirs, and the institute/community also has its own…

All these diverse cultures come together in community within the collective “culture” of the institute, and each brings to bear to a greater or lesser degree, its particular influence on the fraternal life to which we are called. No two cultures see a reality in exactly the same way. Amid the necessary process of incluturation, it may even be possible to speak in terms of a “culture shock”. And therefore, for the sake of better
fraternal relations, which culture is to be given pride of place in community: one’s own or the institute’s?

All these “cultural encounters,” it goes without saying, will necessarily create situations with their own particular and varied consequences. For example, if a brother is closed in upon himself, under the pretext of wanting to maintain and protect his own culture, saying: “well, I’m just not like that…What that brother is rejecting is the opportunity to be open to the other, to be tolerant of the other, making allowances for, the other’s culture, or not being open to any other culture, at all. The result is that little by little one’s rational dimension becomes atrophied. Such behaviour tends to create barriers that can lead to isolation, individualism, or “self-sufficiency” in the most pejorative sense of that word. There is little or no space for fraternal life.

But the opposite reaction is also possible. The individual seeks to reject every aspect of his own culture so as to assimilate the other entirely. One own cultural background is sacrificed so as to identify with the other, for the sake of obtaining a kind of “respectability,” which appears to be the expedient approach to adopt under the circumstances. This amounts to what one might call a cultural “cross-dressing”. The individual may be said to be living a “double identity,” resulting in relationships which can only be shallow, unstable. People who act this way may be said to wear the weighty masks of mendacity, betrayal, disloyalty, etc.

The third cultural relationship consists in bearing proudly one’s own cultural heritage, but at the same time remaining open to all other cultures; such a person is able to exploit his own cultural traits, and integrate them with those of other cultures, and thus help to promote the relational and capacity for integration and for the growth of each member, and of the community. Fraternal life becomes more fulfilling, and there is genuine community building.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that if one were to act without any cultural reference point, rejecting one’s original culture, would be to leave oneself open to developing a complex of “de-culturation,” and becoming “culture-less, a prey to self marginalization, and to with no human or relational anchor, etc.

In the final analysis, can cultural differences actually be obstacles to fraternal life in community? I believe that at the core of all cultural abundance in community, there is a
unifying factor that fosters the growth of that vital element that must exist among all cultures, and that element is the very culture of the institute itself. The institute’s energizing force must become a means of attracting together every member of the community, transforming the many and diverse cultural parts into one a single body, the fraternal community.

In other words, since the culture of the institute is such an integral part of community life, is the focal point and for all the many and diverse cultures of its members. The community adapts the intra-cultural to the benefit of the intercultural. This is why flexibility is so important in relationships among the members the local community. Any “cultural complications” that arise in community should be seen as an opportunity to turn to our shared community culture that gathers us together in the first place. For by vocation brothers must feel comfortable and free enough to enter fully into the cultural dynamic of their local community. Since culture is such dynamic element the institute will never cease to become the richer for the contribution of so many other cultures, contributions that promote relational vitality among all its members.
Living in “real time”

Often in community we speak of conflicting generations or the generation gap. The tendency is to heap the blame for this acknowledged phenomenon on the times, as if time the passage of time itself causes changes. There are those who say: “In my time (day), that was unheard of.” “In my day….” Others might say: “That may have been all right in the past, but now it is my time … It’s my “watch” now.” Can time itself really affect the quality of our fraternal relationships in community? Can it really possess such power?

In point of fact, time in its objective reality, is “unconscious”; it is not even aware of its own existence, because of its eternal routine. Therefore, it takes no stock of anyone and anything whatsoever. However attached to time we may be, time could not care less about us. Time has no need of our affections. What we must genuine be concerned with is finding the means necessary to be best prepared to adapt ourselves to the multiple and often irreversible changes that continually occur all around us.

Just think of alternating of night and day. Ever since the dawn of time these have never ceased to mark the beginning and the end of each day. With each passing day we become both older and less young, without any possibility of reversal or repetition. Countless changes and variations continue to effect change in the world around us. Amid all this change what remains particularly important is that we realize the importance of the vital give of dialogue in coming to grips with the challenge of inter-generationality increasingly present in our local communities

Dialogue is an integral part of the culture of the institute and is an essential element for the growth of the individual and the local community. There is no growth possible without a climate of genuine openness and brotherhood and trust. In terms of the two groups of the young and less young which is better placed to better comprehend the implications and impact of the changes around both on fraternal life in community? In its role as a bond of unity and a source of happiness dialogue among brothers of all ages who are called to share the same life and the same mission and ministry, constitutes an ongoing formation that is as diverse as it is well-ordered.
We are all brothers called to the same way of life and to the same mission in the midst of a world ever more complicated and diversified. Let us collaborate in preparing one another to live both well. Let us be one body. Let us our unity be the instrument by means of which we “educate” and “evangelize” in all humility and simplicity. It is thus that we will win over the world.

This phenomenon of time that we are sharing is my time, it is your time, but it is especially “our” time. Ours it is to use time to be who we are called to be together. In terms of fraternal community, there must be no half-way measures: you are either fully a part of the body or you are not. And only the fully committed can fully share with Andre Coindre, Brother Polycarp (Brother Xavier) and our predecessors in the Charism of foundation.

WHO ARE YOU? Fraternal Life in Community: Part 6
Son of Coindre

WHO ARE YOU? Fraternal Life in Community: Part 7
Witness brotherhood