

# COMMUNITY LIFE

## INTRODUCTION

Values such as fraternity, communion, justice, peace and the integrity of creation are of great importance today, and rightly so. We live in a world marked by violence, *“a world suffering and threatened, but also full of the promise of life<sup>1</sup>”* a world that is thirsting for peace and real friendship.

In this context, the question of what does it mean to be human arises insistently. How does it happen that a human person can crush another and even eliminate them? We experience the same questions arising in ourselves that St James asked at the beginning of the Church: *“what causes wars, what causes conflicts among you?... (Jas 4:1-2)*

Gathered together by the call of Christ to be places of life and of witness to universal solidarity, our religious communities cannot remain indifferent to these questionings. The reflection on the theme of community life by our communities has highlighted some important points which can help us to look anew at this everyday yet vital reality. We have felt the need to return to the foundation of this fraternity, so as to welcome it for what it really is - a gift which must bear fruit, a mission which must make of our communities images of the love of the Father made manifest in Christ.

## 1 THE FOUNDATIONS OF COMMUNITY LIFE

Consecrated life is an initiative of the Father. It also has Christological and pneumatological dimensions and thus expresses *“the Trinitarian nature of the Christian life”*, and anticipates the eschatological fulfilment towards which the whole Church born on the day of Pentecost is tending<sup>2</sup>. This **Trinitarian confession** links us to the multifarious vocations, which reveal the unique light of Christ in the Church. Just as the consecrated life is a proclamation of the Trinitarian action, *“fraternal life itself, whereby consecrated persons strive to live in Christ with “one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32), shows itself as an eloquent witness to the Trinity<sup>3</sup>*. Community life is foundational for the life of the Church and the growth of all its members.

The community of the first disciples of Christ remains the model of every community in the Church. In this first community, an important place was given to prayer, praise, instruction and mutual up building in communion (Ac 2:42). The members of the **apostolic community** knew how to appreciate the common life and savour the pleasure and joy of being together (Ac 2:46). They lived united in heart and soul (Ac 4:32), they were concerned about justice and the care of the poorest among them. They put all they had in common and gave to each one according to their need. (Ac 2:45; 4:34) This is the model which inspired St Augustine in writing for the communities which he founded. For him, community life was an essential requirement of our religious vocation, and even of the Christian vocation. Our belonging to Christ integrates us into the ecclesial body of which the religious community is a little cell.

Through the **Eucharist** which forms the Church, Christ is present in our history, in our communities and in our personal lives. We are called to make this presence manifest in our daily lives, through liturgical celebration, and the communion among ourselves and with the whole of creation. We want the Eucharist, the centre of

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<sup>1</sup> Leaflet Philosophy and Passion, General Chapter 2006

<sup>2</sup> Cf. VC 14 and 16

<sup>3</sup> Cf. VC 20 and 21

our lives, “to make of our communities places of hospitality which will be dwelling places for God where everyone can feel welcomed, at home, and respected<sup>4</sup>.” With Christ, we enter into the paschal mystery, celebrated daily by the Church: bread broken and shared, life given up, even where it is not possible to have a daily celebration of the Eucharist. Communion in the Body of Christ unites us. It commits us to the cultivation of thanksgiving and gratitude, to living eucharistically. This is a decision we must take so that our communities may be settings for the expression of gratuity, beauty and sisterly love.

## 2 COMMUNITY AS MISSION

We form a **body** which has been ceaselessly built up since the beginnings of the Assumption, and each of our communities is in itself a place of mission.

Following Marie Eugenie and all those who have gone before us, we continue this building up of the Congregation (1Cor. 3, 10-11) by our words, our actions and the witness of the whole of our life. Ours is the mission to incarnate and show forth among us, the human values of God made Man, values of tenderness, gentleness, compassion, kindness and mercy. It is together, in community, that we live our religious life, in a personal commitment, and in responsibility for each other. The vigour of our community life depends on the time which we dedicate to it and the means we take to build it up and maintain strong inter-personal and community relations. We need to have some privileged times which unite us, to share our faith experiences, to celebrate reconciliation and daily life. Silence, trust, respect, openness, dialogue, availability and attentiveness to each other are great helps. Our communities are called to be places where we can experience the restfulness and joy of being together and being simply ourselves. Each one of us can contribute to the development of the gifts of the other, rejoice in the unique qualities she brings, and still more, the gift which she is for the community.

The discovery of the **inalienable value of the person** has enabled a better understanding of personalities. The community cannot exist without a clear recognition of the particular place of each of its members, with her needs and desires, her gifts and her weaknesses. However, we must watch that we do not slip into giving excessive weight to our personal aspirations so that we dispense ourselves from reference to the community and from all concern for the others. The great challenge is always to find “*the right equilibrium between respect for the person and the common good, between the demands and needs of the individual and those of the community, between personal charisms and the apostolic project of the community. And all this while avoiding both the individualism which brings disintegration and the communitarianism which levels everything*<sup>5</sup>.” The movement which must be made from “I” to “we” cannot happen without the “culture of love” oriented towards the interests not of each individual, but of “*the interests of Christ*<sup>6</sup>” present in each of our brothers and sisters. A community life of love shines out radiantly in service, gift of self, respect, forgiveness, and acceptance of others as they are. This encourages unity and communion in the community, where each sister is called to take her specific place until the very end of her life.

The priority we give to young people in our mission ought to keep us attentive to our **younger sisters**, so that we are together concerned to make our communities places of welcome for all those who feel attracted by our life.

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<sup>4</sup> Leaflet on Philosophy and passion, Gen. Chapter 2006

<sup>5</sup> Fraternal Life in community n° 39

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ibid*

Our young sisters bring to our communities their freshness, enthusiasm, dynamism, and their knowledge of today's world. It is for us who precede them in the religious life to reveal to them its beauty, and to transmit to them our family heritage (tradition, charism) and a certain wisdom of life.

The role of **elderly and sick sisters** is of inestimable value in the building up of the life of the community. *"The care and concern which they deserve arises not only from a clear obligation of charity and gratitude but also from an awareness that their witness is of great service to the Church and their own Institutes, and that their mission continues to be worthwhile and meritorious, even when for reasons of age or infirmity they have had to abandon their specific apostolate..."*<sup>7</sup> Our elderly sisters depict beautiful pages of our continuing history. Their fidelity and witness stimulate us in our own spiritual journey. Their presence is a constant invitation to consider the essential and to catch a glimpse of the ultimate end of the adventure with Christ. In addition to the attention and necessary care which should be lavished on them, our elderly and sick sisters need a good preparation to live the last stage of their life with detachment and peace, determined to give themselves right to the end, in facing up *"to the challenges of advancing age"*<sup>8</sup> and of sickness. For in religious life we never finish our mission, it simply takes other forms.

Simply by existing, the religious community is already a proclamation. It can be a real witness and sign of hope for the world. Members of religious congregations have as their primary task to build fraternal communities. The call to proclaim the Gospel is fundamentally a call to bring about communion. This is *"the source and at the same time the fruit of the mission."*<sup>9</sup> Our common mission in community life, commits us to nourishing among us **deep sisterly relations**. Knowledge and love of self make possible better communication with others. It is important to draw upon certain modern tools, such as techniques of communication, and conflict management so as to improve our relationships. We are all responsible for the quality of our community life. It is the consequence of our following of Christ and the condition for mystical, sisterly and prophetic communities. Communion in the community gives us wings for mission. It stimulates the gift of self. We receive our mission from the community and each sister feels that she is sent out by the community. We feel the urgency of living the mission in a manner which is both creative and daring, in accordance with the needs of the times. This requires reflection and a discernment which commits the whole community. On the other hand, the difficulty of finding a balanced rhythm questions the coexistence of diverse personal projects and the apostolic project of the community.

The mission by community life finds another expression in the dimension of the **"inter"** which marks our communities. We can bear witness to the joy of a community life lived in the unity of *international, intercultural and intergenerational* communities. This must be born of a deep desire which leads to a decision and commitment by everybody. The sense of the Body-Congregation and the family spirit are thereby strengthened and will make themselves manifest among other ways, by the availability of sisters for missions outside their own Province or Region and outside their own Continent.

It is perhaps not possible for all our Provinces and Region to realise concretely or visibly the "dream" of internationality, but we can undertake a *"way of being"* which marks our perception of reality and our understanding of the mission today.

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<sup>7</sup> VC 44

<sup>8</sup> Fraternal Life in community n° 68

<sup>9</sup> Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles* n° 32

### 3 COMMUNITY AS THE PLACE OF MISSION

Every community is set up for a precise mission, a mission which we support in communion with one another. The community life to which we aspire, is rooted in our **vocation to communion**. It remains a daily challenge, a sharing in the mission of Christ who brings together in unity the dispersed children of God. (cf. Jn. 11:32) It is a call to persevere in the *“the beneficial struggle of sisterly love<sup>10</sup>”*, a call to recognise and welcome the presence of the Spirit which is always at work. For it is He who is our communion and it is He who makes us a community.

World events and those in our respective countries challenge and invite us to this perseverance in sisterly love. They constitute an appeal to live the communion among us fully, and to take part in the building of more human societies, by the witness of our lives in community. This is what Pope John Paul II was inviting us to when he said: *“On the threshold of a new millennium, our hope is quickened of seeing the relationships between people being more and more inspired by the ideal of a truly universal fraternity<sup>11</sup>.”* Our contribution to the extension of the Kingdom also goes by way of the search for communion, the concern to live out inclusion at all levels, openness to the universal and to the particular which are a strong sign in a divided and fragmented world where the accent is most often put on membership of particularities and identities which exclude. Solidarity and communion between different Institutes, as also collaboration with members of **other Christian confessions**, or **other religions** are also a strength, a source of witness and mutual stimulus for all those men and women who work for a greater fraternity and of a real transformation of our societies.

**The contemplative experience** is a great help to us in living out our mission, as a community, and in community. The religious community draws its strength from its common prayer, sustained by personal prayer, the sharing of the Word and of the Eucharist<sup>12</sup>. The times of community celebrations create an atmosphere of discernment. They also contribute to the union of hearts, thanks to the sharing of our experiences, our joys and our worries. The community is thus strengthened in faith and sent on mission. It is through listening to the Word of God, and listening to our sisters, that we can discern and accomplish the will of Him who has called us together by his Spirit. In fact, the community is for us, Religious of the Assumption, *“the place of birth, of rootedness and the discernment of the vision which is ours. This vision is not a static given, but the fruit of our common prayer, of our effort to live together in love and of the purification of our gaze which strengthens our interior liberty.<sup>13</sup>”*

It is important, then, to be formed in **discernment**, *“to learn to discern”* in a sisterly spirit, so as to welcome what the other says, and even being called into question and challenged.

**The community apostolic project** gives the orientations of the mission and specifies the way to live it today in our different contexts and in line with our charism. Our educational mission is always oriented towards the transformation of persons and of situations<sup>14</sup>. We want it to be a response to contemporary challenges, as body-community, through a personal and community commitment, in interdependence and co-responsibility. In this way, community life will be so much the more harmonious, respecting the different poles of our life.

The religious community also offers a place to experience the dimension of **Justice and Peace**. It is *“the primary place where we learn to live in just and peaceful relationships that lead to solidarity.<sup>15</sup>”* Our sisters in

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<sup>10</sup> Sr Christina Maria, Report Part 1, p.34 Gen Chapter 2006

<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, Message for the Day of Peace 2001, n° 1

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Fraternal Life in Community n° 14

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Pre Chapter Documents, p.10

<sup>14</sup> Cf Leaflet on Transformative Education in the Assumption, Gen. Chapter 2006

<sup>15</sup> Leaflet JPIC-S, Gen. Chapter 2006

community have a right to our attention and affection. It is “a duty” of justice and fraternity, which can exclude no-one, even if we must recognise the unique character of our interpersonal relationships. This “duty” goes beyond our feelings of “attraction or antipathy<sup>16</sup>”.

We can make our own the call made to Africa, on the occasion of its second Synod, a call to become “communities at the service of reconciliation, communities of justice and peace<sup>17</sup>...”

The call to reconciliation is rooted in the merciful love of God for us in the person of Christ, who has given us the Holy Spirit. This gift instructs us to live justice and peace with those closest to us – our sisters, and with everybody else.

The experience of fraternity is not limited to the religious community. It extends to everyone. Don't let people come to us, with a desire to share our spirituality and our mission, “in the reciprocal respect of vocations and life styles proper to religious and laity.<sup>18</sup>” The understanding of the Church itself as communion is a call to dialogue between its different members, to support each other on the path of holiness, and to give a more unified and focussed response to the needs of today's world.

**Assumption-Together** is for us an appropriate response, which corresponds to the desire St Marie Eugenie from the beginning of the Congregation, for collaboration and sharing with lay people. The spiritual and apostolic companionship lived in solidarity, respect and friendship, is the source of dynamism, hope and mutual support for us all. “Together, laity and sisters, we wish to be witnesses to the Risen Lord, the tenderness of God and the transforming power of the Gospel<sup>19</sup>”, in every situation and place.

## CONCLUSION

Community life is a fundamental element of religious life in the Assumption. It is in the community that each sister finds the strength and support to live her vocation, it is there that each is encouraged to take the way of **holiness**. The community participates in the mission of the Church-communion, of which it is an expression. It is an eloquent sign for our constantly mutating peoples and for this reason it is important to take care of the fraternal life in our communities.

The realities of our contemporary societies illustrate well the desire for fraternity and at the same time the difficulty of achieving it, in the face of the conflicts of interest which govern the world.

We ourselves are also threatened by the individualism and the violence which haunt our societies, and there is a great temptation not to look at the world with hope. Awareness of the meaning and role of our communities should spur us to live in them with a concern for personal growth and mutual help, so as to witness to what the love of God can achieve through our human frailty. Community life can only be a real **witness** in the measure that it makes us live. This is why we must beg the Spirit, and be ready to welcome this gift, which commits us to be a gift for our sisters. For the community is our first field of evangelisation and the first place in which we are evangelised, a place of permanent conversion. This is the price which will make our communities “**good news**” for the world.

This document, fruit of the work of the communities on the Rule of Life, was elaborated by the Commission Rule of Life and approved by the GPC of Abidjan in October 2009.

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<sup>16</sup> Rule of Life n° 55

<sup>17</sup> Theme of Second Synod for Africa, October 2009

<sup>18</sup> Fraternal Life in Community n° 70

<sup>19</sup> Leaflet, Assumption Together, Gen. Chapter 2006