



Letter #5 of the Superior General

"WITNESSES TO LOVE"

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Augustinians of the Assumption

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Assumptionist Apostolic Community

The faces of community

Ten young adults were gathered in front of the Church with their backs to the assembly, facing the priest and the baptismal font. They had come with their families and those who had accompanied them during their many months of preparation for baptism; by now they formed a close-knit community. The priest asked them, one after the other: “why do you want to be baptized?” The answers were what you might expect, but the simplest came from the last young man: it’s the answer I remember best. “Why do you want to be baptized?” He pointed with his finger to the people gathered behind him: “Because they love me.”

Nowa Huta (“New Town”), an industrial center not far from Krakow, was constructed in the 1950s as a model Communist town. It had everything the workers wanted except a church. The authorities allowed the people to set up a cross in the central square where their new church would be built. They gathered regularly for Mass every Sunday, but the authorities decided to withdraw their approval. They tore the cross down and dispersed the crowds. The cross was repeatedly reconstructed, the people kept coming back. Finally, thirty years later, their bishop, Karol Wojtyla, laid the cornerstone for a new church in the presence of some fifty-thousand people. He said to them: “This city of Nowa Huta was built as a city without God, but the will of God and the workers here has prevailed... This is not just a building. These are living stones.”

No matter how much we think we know what a community or the Church is, stories like these still have something to teach us. For that young man, community was a place where he knew that he was loved. For the people of Nowa Huta, the Church community stood as a witness to a truth that the communist regime did not want to deal with.

The continuing relevance of the topic

These are just two brief stories about community. Do you have some of your own to tell? Maybe there are some “success stories” about community that you would do well to tell your brothers about today. Where and when did you have those experiences? What made that community such a good place to be? No doubt, you also have some “horror stories”, experiences of community that tempted you to say that fraternal life was just impossible.

I’m thinking about those young people I used to know at the university who had very active social lives: they knew dozens of people, had many “friends”, went to parties every weekend, and yet very very often would confide to me how lonely they felt, how much they would like to have a friend in whom they could confide, how difficult it was for them to “fit” into the group. The latest psychological malady to afflict Japanese youth is a hermit syndrome: in his parents’ home, a young man might isolate himself in his room and make secret forays into the kitchen or TV room when other family members are not around.

And I can’t help thinking, with some sadness, about brothers who do not feel at home in their own community or don’t feel like they can talk about some of the important things that bother them or some of the deeply happy things that they experience. I see some of the houses in which we live, where there is no common room in which the brothers like to gather occasionally and where “private rooms” are so well equipped that common rooms become unnecessary.

The Christian community of Nowa Huta witnessed with courage and perseverance to the God whose love gathered them together and was their source of strength. I know of Assumptionist communities that, in a similar way are the admiration of their neighbors, men whom people respect for their simplicity, their hospitality, their prayerful spirit. Are we inclined to place more emphasis on the apostolic impact of the zealous individual than on the Christian witness of the loving community? Perhaps we’ve given up on the possibility of men *together* witnessing to a *common* ideal of Christian life.

You know the challenges better than I, in your own cultures, in your own regions. Fr. d’Alzon was obsessed with the cause of unity in a society and in a Church wounded in that regard. In our own day, Pope John Paul II has been similarly taken up with the same cause: unity among nations, unity among Christians, unity among people of every religion. The call to communion remains a great cause of our time.

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The bibliography at the end of this letter testifies to the fact that we Assumptionists also take this cause seriously. We have been talking about apostolic community for many years.¹ We might wonder if there is anything left to be said? But with regard to apostolic community much remains to be done. We speak the language of community easily, but speaking and acting as part of a body rather than as an individual does not come easily or spontaneously.

It can be argued that apostolic community is *the* distinctive trait of our brand of religious life. “Assumptionists, we are religious who live in apostolic community.” (Rule of Life #1) “We choose to live in community according to the Rule and the spirit of Saint Augustine, in view of the Kingdom.” (Rule of Life #6)

Finally, the topic remains relevant because the witness of men and women living in communion with each other is an important witness in today’s world. One commentator of Augustine puts it this way: “The privileged place today for contemplation, for revelation, for presence is no longer Sinai, or Mount Tabor, but the Cenacle where brothers are gathered together, where we are united in the same household, in the same Church.”²

The re-expression of our charism

Apostolic community is the second theme to be addressed in our continuing effort to re-discover and re-express our Assumptionist charism. The General Chapter of 1999 asked that each year a working paper be published to encourage communities and religious to articulate the significance of what they were living, in the footsteps of Fr. d’Alzon and those who have preceded us.³ Last year, it was Letter #4 (Parts one and two):

¹ Our own Rule of Life (1981) alludes to the thought of Saint Augustine and Fr. d’Alzon on the fraternal life and summarizes 130 years of experience and reflection in this domain. See subsequent rich reflections on the topic: Report of the Superior General, General Chapter 1987, Part I, chapter 3; *The Passion for the Kingdom of God in Today’s World*, General Chapter 1993, Part I, chapter 3; Claude Maréchal. « Initier les jeunes à la vie communautaire apostolique: Le coeur de la formation à l’Assomption ». Louvain, July 1996; « Passionnés ae Dieu pour un siècle nouveau – Pour nous redire noire chansme ». Proposal to the General Chapter of 1999 by the General Council, Rome, 1999 (see chapter 7), *Facing a New Century with a Passion for God*, General Chapter 1999, pp. 7–8.

² Francis de Beer, *L’Amour est Dieu*. Bar le Due, 1980, p. 223.

³ *Facing a New Century with a Passion for God*, #3.

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“Faith in Jesus Christ”. That sparked some interesting initiatives in the communities and some good exchanges among religious and with our lay friends. There were even some repercussions among our sisters in the family. Some of this, we hope, has sparked genuine personal and community renewal.

Nevertheless, we had difficulty gathering together the fruit of our experience during the year. We hope that an improved procedure this year might help address some of those problems. With that goal in mind, the Major Superiors at the recent meeting of the Council of Congregation reviewed our progress and made some suggestions for the remainder of our work.

Recall the objective set by the General Chapter: to re-express our charism, to produce by 2005 a summary statement of the charism that could be used by the religious and the laity associated with them (#3). The Chapter wanted every religious to be involved in this process (#5) and not just those who have studied our charism more formally. Such an effort, it was thought, could spark not just conversation, but conversion as well, personal and community renewal. That being said, the Council of the Congregation did not want to underestimate the important role that “experts” and skilled writers should play in this process, especially in the preparation of a draft for consideration by the members of the Chapter of 2005.

Consequently, the Council of Congregation foresees the following procedure. We will continue our work on the local level, providing feedback from the local communities to the vice/Provincial. This feedback, eventually from our work on all three themes (faith in Jesus Christ, apostolic community, mission for the Kingdom), will then be considered by an international committee that will make a first attempt at re-expressing the charism, which will be considered by the communities before producing a final draft for discussion at the General Chapter.

In order to facilitate feedback on the topic of the present letter, apostolic community, we would like you to respond briefly in writing to the following three questions:

- 1) *What two or three convictions do you have in your community regarding apostolic community as a dimension of our Assumptionist charism?*
- 2) *What specifically are some of the difficulties that you have encountered in living out this ideal of apostolic community?*

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- 3) ***What two or three practices do you have in your community that are life-giving for you, that genuinely nourish this dimension of your life? N.B. Cite those that have worked well for you and explain how and why they have worked.***

Send your responses to your own vice/Provincial, with a copy directly to the General Council so that we too can follow the development of your thinking on these questions.

In the remaining part of this letter, we would like to present some of our convictions and some of the practices that we think are important. Though they are the convictions and the suggestions of the Superior General and his Council, do not attribute to them any more authority than they deserve. Like you, we are brothers seeking to understand this central dimension of our life and to find the best ways to live it out in our daily life.

SOME CONVICTIONS

1) True to our founding charism, attentive to the Spirit at work today

Community was a priority for Augustine and for d’Alzon.

It is frequently said that living in a community was not of great importance in Fr. d’Alzon’s thinking about religious life; it is said that he insisted rather on personal sanctification (the Kingdom within us) and the mission (the Kingdom around us). It is true that we will not find in Fr. d’Alzon the same approach to community life that we take today. Our needs and problems are not the ones that he dealt with.⁴ We could learn a great deal by having a greater appreciation of how his approach differs.⁵

But even if he does not speak about fraternal life in our terms, Fr. d’Alzon clearly considered it to be part of an Assumptionist’s identity.⁶ In his letters,

⁴ See *Fraternal Life in Community*, (“Congegavit nos in unum Christi amor”), Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Rome, 1994, #4–5, on some of the changes today that affect our way of looking at fraternal life.

⁵ As an example of how Assumptionists spoke about community fifty years ago. refer to the retreat given in Rome by Fr. Athanase Sage in 1955. During that retreat, he gave no talk specifically on community. Nonetheless, he did speak of the kinds of virtues that should characterize our relations with others: frankness, openness, freedom (chapter 1). He insists on love of the Church as an essential element of our charism and discusses it by reference to St. Augustine’s Commentary on I John and his theology of the Body of Christ (chapter 6). Love of the Assumption is placed in this context, since the community exists not for itself but for the Church (chapter 8). Finally, Fr. Sage speaks at length about the mission of the Superior, implying what kind of life should be lived by the brothers in community. Fr. Sage does provide us with a rich reflection on the fraternal life in his volume of essays on the Rule of St. Augustine and conferences on religious life according to St. Augustine (Sage, Athanase, *La vie religieuse selon Saint Augustin*, Paris, 1972).

⁶ See the frequent references to community life and relations among brothers in the Constitutions of 1855. In the database of Fr. d’Alzon’s writings, we find just under seven hundred references to “community” or “communities”, seventy of which are in the foundational documents.

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his retreats, and his major writings he often alludes to the kinds of relations that should exist among religious and to the practices that foster fraternal bonds: conversation at table, collaboration in the mission, common prayer, a common daily schedule, community recreation, Chapter meetings, certain monastic practices, and most of all the Eucharist as the center of the common life. D’Alzon chose the Rule of Augustine for his religious and urged them to be formed in Augustine’s spiritual doctrine. D’Alzon’s insistence on the Trinity and his recurring discussions of unity as a particular preoccupation for us at the Assumption make dear his conviction that Assumptionists should be men of communion.⁷ His own capacity for friendship suggests the kinds of relationships he would have encouraged in community. Therefore, while it is clear that we might speak of community today in different terms than in the 19th century, there is no doubt that for Fr. d’Alzon fraternal life is an essential dimension of the Assumptionist charism. The real question for us is: how do we live today something that 150 years ago was considered a constitutive dimension of our life by the founder?

2) Community is God’s burning desire for humanity⁸

Apostolic community is most importantly a theological reality.

What do you suppose God wants most of all for human beings? That’s not such a hard question to answer. God wants for us that which constitutes His own greatest source of joy, viz. community.⁹ Jesus said the same thing in a variety of different ways: I have come to gather the nations into one people, for reconciliation, for communion. From the beginning God’s desire was to establish a covenant with humanity, to draw close to his creatures in a very particular relationship with a specific people. And the model for all of that was the divine life itself.¹⁰ God is community, not a solitary deity, and this is what He wants for everyone: “that they may be one as we are one.” There is a soft way of understanding all of this unity language. “Peace” and “caring” can be reduced to very insubstantial and insignificant sentiments. But in

⁷ See « Passionnés de Dieu pour un siècle nouveau – Pour nous redire noire chansme » 62–63.

⁸ See *Fraternal Life in Community*, #8–10 and *Ratio Institutions II*, C, 5.

⁹ See *Vita Consecrata*, chapter II.

¹⁰ *Fraternal Life in community*, #20 and *Vita Consecrata*, esp. #17–22, 41. See also Georges Tavard, *The Directory*, on the importance of the Trinity in Fr. d’Alzon’s sountual thought and experience.

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God’s mouth, such language leads to the ultimate sacrifice, the gift of self out of love. As attentive as we should be in community living to useful human techniques and the fulfillment that comes from living in this way we cannot forget that it is the Trinity and the gift of Jesus on the cross that should inform our thinking about community and guide our daily efforts to live together. It is the gift of the Spirit that inspires and sustains our love for each other. Because the Spirit dwells within each of us, there is no contradiction between love of others and love of self. Yet, because the Spirit is other and a gift, love of others requires that we go out of our selves, in the narrower sense of that word. An appreciation for that deeply mysterious foundation of apostolic community puts all of our daily concerns in perspective.

3) “If you do not love your brothers, you lose your head”

Community and Church: “He is the head, we are the members. “

“What’s really important is tending to one’s relationship with God!” “No, what we need to do is be sure we spend ourselves in generous service to the poor and needy.”

Well, yes and no. John’s first letter reminds us of something that underlies the Gospels and all of Paul’s writings: if you do not love the brother that you can see, how can you say that you love the God that you cannot see? In persecuting Christians, it is Christ that Paul was persecuting. With Jesus as our Head we are the body of Christ. If you do not love your brothers, who form the body, you have turned away from the head that is Christ. How difficult it is for us to feel the suffering of another member of the body. We’re rather inclined to agree with something I heard said recently, even if in a joking tone: “What’s yours is mine, and what’s mine is mine!” In his address for the Feast of St. Ambrose just a few months ago, Cardinal Martini described what I imagine to be the conviction of someone who truly sees himself as a member of this Body: “Thus one says to his brother: You are more important to me than all the rest; what is mine is yours. I love you more than myself; what is yours is more important to me than what is mine. And because your happiness is of prime importance to me, it is everyone’s happiness that counts for me, the happiness of the new humanity, not only that of the family, clan tribe or race, movement, party, or nation but the well-being of the whole of humanity: that is peace.”¹¹

¹¹ Cardinal Carlo Martini, “Terrorisms ritorsione, legittima difesa, guerra e pace”, Address for the Feast of St. Ambrose, Milan, 6 December 2001.

4) Friendship and Affectivity

Apostolic community is also a human reality.¹²

As I wrote above: “It is the Trinity and the gift of Jesus on the cross that should inform our thinking about community and guide our daily efforts to live together.” This reminds us that community is first of all a grace. We do not choose the brothers with whom we live in community; they are given to us; they are a gift (see Rule of Life #7). In marriage and friendship, it is certain natural qualities that draw us in love to another. It is not such natural qualities that bring us together in community, but a faith so alive that we recognize the other as a brother, that is, as intimately one with us in the Spirit. The recognition is not always easy, however. It requires a daily conversion (see Rule of Life #7 and 8) and an ever-deepening faith.

And yet loving one’s brother is not just a “spiritual thing” Fr. d’Alzon spoke of the importance of tenderness, affection, communication, and generous service in community. I think that for St. Augustine friendship in community is the consequence of fraternal relations genuinely founded on faith. The more deeply we are united as brothers in community, the more we can expect to see our brothers as friends.

Perhaps nowadays we understand that relationships in community need to be satisfying and healthy from a human point of view. That requires a good deal of psychological maturity, of affective freedom, of openness to others, even of skill in communicating. It will require efforts at communicating substantially, of discussing important ideas and even communicating more personal experiences and reflections.

It’s often said that on this score there is a “generation gap” in religious life: older religious are uncomfortable, because they were not trained to foster friendship in community; younger religious are unhappy because they find the level of communication, of friendship, and of affective support in community to be inadequate. I’m convinced that it’s no easier for young religious to live their fraternal relations at a deep level than it is for older religious, even if younger religious talk about this more. For all of us, communion, genuine intimacy among brothers, requires a certain self-emptying, a going out of oneself, an effort to find ways to escape one’s own self-centeredness and enter into the heart of another person’s reality. Young

¹² See *Ratio institutionis*, II, C. 4.

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or old, we all need the grace of conversion to be a real friend for our brothers.¹³

And in this context, chastity makes sense.¹⁴ We often say that chastity is meant to free us for love. We cannot avoid the fact that chastity “hurts”; it has a true ascetic dimension; it requires genuine deprivation and conversion. There is no question of trying to find in apostolic community a kind of affective satisfaction that is more proper to conjugal love. But there is a real sense in which fraternal love should be satisfying even on the human level.

5) “Christian communism”

Community is a local, provincial, continental, and global reality.

Easily enough Fr. d’Alzon seemed to send religious off on their own to establish a new mission. And in our history we can cite numerous enough examples of this same practice. I think this proves that Assumptionists are above all inspired by zeal for the Kingdom and that they are prepared to make great sacrifices for the sake of the mission, but I don’t think that this proves that community is of secondary importance. In fact, the practice in our history seems to prove the contrary. When Fr. Galabert went to the East it was not his choice, but because he was sent by the community (i.e. by Fr. d’Alzon). While he was there, he maintained close contact with the founder in Nîmes. I believe he saw himself as the community’s pioneer and not as a lone-ranger. After 1948 when non-Bulgarian Assumptionists were expelled from the country, what efforts Blessed Kamen and Blessed Pavel exerted to maintain contact with their brothers in Western Europe and with their Provincial and General Superior. Even isolated, they were part of a community.

Today we insist more than forty years ago that Assumptionists are by vocation meant to live in local community.¹⁵ We are less inclined to make exceptions to this rule. Sometimes we need to make *suet* exceptions for personal reasons, but we understand that these are exceptions and work with the religious whenever possible a: integration into a community. Why have we recently insisted more on common life in the local community? Is it

¹³ *Fraternal Life in community*, #23–25 and 37, on the ascetic dimension of fraternal life.

¹⁴ *Fraternal Life in community*, #44, on the community dimension of the evangelical counsels.

¹⁵ See Report to the General Chapter of 1987, Part I, II and III.

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because the ambient culture encourages us to be more individualistic, and we sense the need to resist this pull by submitting ourselves to the daily reminders that community living provides? Like the vows, living under one roof (like being married to one woman) has its ascetical dimensions. But in the end it is designed to provide us with the opportunity to love Paul and Lucien and Jean-Marie, and not a faceless humanity’.

But living under one roof does not a community make.¹⁶ This requires communication, common activities, transparency, concrete gestures of service (see below). It requires that we be one heart and one mind. It is perhaps in this that our vow of Augustinian poverty takes on its meaning. Augustine did not so much insist that we live austerely, although his communities had only what they needed. But he did insist that all of our goods be held in common, that we submit all of our needs to the community, and that we live only with what the community gives us. This ideal of life is a kind of Christian communism, as Fr. Goulven Madec likes to call it.

A particular challenge for us today is sharing our wealth (material and spiritual) across provincial, national and cultural boundaries. We have found inter-provincial solidarity to be one important way of doing this. But to what extent do we remain imprisoned by-linguistic, provincial, tribal, national, cultural boundaries?¹⁷ Refer back to Cardinal Martini’s words, cited above. While remaining at the service of our people, how do we express today our belonging to one religious family spread across the globe? In an international family, isolating ourselves within one community is as great an offense as refusing to reach out to brothers living at my side.

6) “Charity begins at home”

*Community is essentially apostolic.*¹⁸

The apostolate is our way of communicating God’s love and making it real for people of our own day. But what would the significance of such a charitable impulse be if we were unwilling to take up the challenge of loving

¹⁶ *Fraternal Life in community*, #3: “It is clear that ‘fraternal life’ will not automatically be achieved by observance of the norms which regulate common life; but it is evident that common life is designed to favor fraternal life greatly.”

¹⁷ See Report to the General Chapter of 1987, III, 3 and 4.

¹⁸ Rule of Life #12 and 19; see *Ratio institutions*, II, C, 6. See *Fraternal Life in community*, #1, see 2b, and especially 2d: “Fraternal communion is at both the beginning and the end of apostolate.”

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our brothers in community? To put it more positively, for us religious with an Augustinian inspiration fraternal charity is already a way of witnessing to the presence of the Kingdom in our midst, it is a first apostolate and for us a measure of the quality of our service outside of the community.¹⁹ As some would say, a community is a school of love, where we learn how to listen, how to serve, how to forgive and be forgiven.²⁰

Our apostolate is communal in other ways as well. We do not believe in lone-ranger ministries. No one sends himself on a mission.²¹ If he tries, the content of his message will very likely be nothing other than himself. Just as the Father sent the Son, so now the Son sends others through his community on earth, the Church. And religious are sent through the Church and their own religious community. If the apostolate, then, is not my own, then I need to be in regular contact with the community that sends me. It would be good if they confirmed me regularly in their commission. I would do well to keep them fully informed about my activities and ask them often if what I am doing corresponds to their intention in sending me. I need to ask them to join me in praying for the people I serve and the guidance of the Spirit in my work. And occasionally it would be good for me to tell the community that I am ready to take on another mission if they have something they think is more urgent that they would like to entrust to me.

If the mission is not my own, you might wonder with how much passion I will be able to assume it. Saint Paul helps us address this question in his first letter to the Corinthians (chapter 12). There should be a certain “fit” between the mission entrusted to me and the gifts I have received from the Spirit. Such a fit will ensure a good measure of energy and passion in fulfilling my responsibilities. But these gifts are given by the Spirit for the building up of the Body (see chapter 13 of the same letter). It is not personal fulfillment that is the motivating principle; it is love of the Body of Christ that drives me.

We would do well to think about obedience in this context of community as apostolic. We obey the community that sends us on mission, for it is

¹⁹ *Fraternal Life in community*, #54–57 and Part III. “All must be reminded that fraternal communion, as such, is already an apostolate: in other words, it contributes directly to the work of evangelization.” « Passionnes de Dieu pour un siecle nouveau – Pour nous redire notre charisme », p. 58.

²⁰ *The Passion for the Kingdom of God in Today’s World*, General Chapter 1993, First Part, chapter 3.

²¹ « Passionnes de Dieu pour un siecle nouveau – Pour nous redire notre charisme », p. 59: see also *Facing a New Century with a Passion for God*, General Chapter 1999, #17.

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attentiveness to the Spirit and love for the Body that give obedience its meaning. Making apostolic plans with one’s brothers, being accountable to them for the work one does and evaluating it with them, even keeping them informed on a daily basis of one’s activities and outings—these are ways of reminding ourselves that a “member” separated from the “body” soon withers and dies.

SOME PRACTICES

The image is a good one; it bears repeating. Community is a body; it is made up of people with bodies. A Christian community is the Body of Christ. Love has to be expressed in deeds; it needs to speak a language that the body understands. It goes without saying that the love that inspires the deeds is most important, but without the deeds we human beings could easily deceive ourselves regarding the genuineness of our love and legitimately wonder about the intentions of our neighbor.²² Religious who for forty years have been engaged in re-examining their way of life and discarding forms and customs that had lost meaning run the risk of disparaging all forms and all customs because they are secondary and because their meaning can be so ambiguous. But a young husband forgets at his own peril how much significance the gift of a flower can have for his wife. And even men are not impervious to such gestures!

While the convictions we have regarding apostolic community are the solid rock on which we build our life together, we also need to be attentive to the practices that enable us to embody and nourish those convictions.²³ Among others, we mention the following as useful means for achieving this end.

1) Holiness and interiority

The importance of personal formation

A community cannot be sound if its members are immature or not serious about deepening their own relationship with God in faith.²⁴ To foster strong fraternal relations each member needs to develop a rich interior life, a substantial measure of self-knowledge, a good sense of humor especially about himself, an inclination for prayer and for reflection, a liking for serious hard work, a sense of initiative, and a personal commitment to living in

²² Saint Augustine goes to great lengths to develop this point in his Commentary on the first letter of John. See especially sermons 5 through 8.

²³ *Facing a New Century with a Passion for God*, General Chapter 1999, #20. The *Ratio institutionis* is particularly rich in concrete suggestions for forming religious to apostolic community, ways useful not only for young religious.

²⁴ *Fraternal Life in community*, #21–22.

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fidelity to the Lord. You cannot be “at home” with a brother if you are not “at home” with yourself (see Mark 9:50). Silence and prayer, *lectio divina*, study, spiritual direction, Scriptural meditation, review of life, journal-writing (in the style of Augustine’s *Confessions*), at times psychological counseling, the daily examen²⁵—these are some of the means to help develop an interior sense. And let’s be realistic, there are some things that militate against it: indiscriminate reading, excessive television watching, idle web-surfing, useless conversation, living with noise of all kinds.

2) Brothers-fathers

The important role of superiors

There was a time not too long ago when the word authority was banned: authority could only mean authoritarianism.²⁶ Suspicion of authority (no doubt because it had become authoritarian and arbitrary at times) has led some religious communities to do away with superiors altogether. But already in 1971, some religious were complaining that there was a leadership vacuum, that those in positions of responsibility were too silent.²⁷ “Authority” is in fact a beautiful word: etymologically it derives from the word ‘to grow’ (*augere*). The brother who serves us as superior is the one who accompanies us in our growth. He is a father because he begets life. And at times we are in need of a father who can help us live when we’re inclined to choose death.

But in our Augustinian tradition he is especially a brother: who listens most of all, who helps us discern our own gifts and put them to best use, who is attentive to our suggestions and involves us in the animation of the community, who helps us remain connected to the other brothers, who is the tangible reminder that we are connected (I mean “bound”) to the community. And he needs to do this in concrete ways: by inviting us to meet with him on occasion. by concrete gestures of affection, by reminding us explicitly (and perhaps often) of our *raison d’être*. It’s not easy to be a Superior. We need to be good to our brothers who are given this mission and give them time to do it well. We should also make it possible for him to get some training for the job. In this regard, we should not be afraid to benefit from the experience and

²⁵ This was a practice highly encouraged by Fr. d’Alzon and renewed in our own day by Fr. Edgar Bourque, a.a. (which he called “the examen for the Kingdom”).

²⁶ *Fraternal Life in community*. #47–53

²⁷ « La communauté locale apostolique ». Council of Congregation, 1971, p. 25–27.

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knowledge of those who are thinking and writing about the kind of leadership that is needed for the world in which we live. Good principles of leadership should not be used only to further worldly pursuits; they should be put to work for the Kingdom.

3) More than self-expression

Growth in our ability to communicate

You think communication is easy? “Expressing” yourself is easy; a primal scream is self-expression. But communication in community or anywhere else is never without effort, even if it is in the end a source of great satisfaction. It is not just a “sharing of opinions”, but requires an effort at reflection and study, an attempt to understand. Then it is necessary to find the appropriate word or gesture to convey one’s meaning to another. And that requires some knowledge of the other, some respect for his “language”. It also requires an effort to listen, to “hear” what another has tried to communicate. Communication at common meals is meant to be enjoyable and relaxing, but that doesn’t mean that we should dispense with all effort when we gather around the table. Communicating during meetings may be less relaxing, but it also requires an effort at clarity, at attentiveness, at reasonableness, at following the line of the discussion. Perhaps some people communicate more effectively than others, but everyone would do well to hone his “communication skills”: the clarity of his thought, the precision of his vocabulary, even the expression on his face as he listens to a brother. What other “skills” do you need to acquire?

5) Beyond meetings

The role of meetings

I don’t like meetings! And I have never hidden the fact that I dislike them. Maybe it’s because I have had to attend so many meetings in my life when little was accomplished, when people made speeches to each other rather than communicated, when participants fell asleep, when no one bothered to follow up on decisions that had been taken.

Most of you have probably had similar experiences. Is it any wonder that when we come home to our community, we don’t want to be obliged to attend yet another meeting?

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I was very happy living in a community that had abolished community meetings. Well, not exactly. We decided to do away with meetings that required extensive preparations, elaborate agendas, boring discussions of the Superior General’s latest letter. We did not have meetings to tend to business questions, but dealt with these when it was practical to do so: before a meal finished, during a quick gathering after morning prayer, or at other moments. But we did decide to get together each week for an hour or more and did the same thing each week. One person formulated a short spontaneous prayer, then each member briefly communicated what he thought had been significant for himself during the week. We then read the Gospel for the upcoming Sunday, and each brother said what light that particular passage shed on his life. Then we ended with a prayer of petition for a specific grace, inspired by the exchange. I looked forward to those “meetings” like none before in my experience as a religious.

My purpose is not to suggest that you stop the kinds of meetings you are holding now and adopt this model, but simply to say that a community needs to “meet”, i.e. come together as brothers on a very regular basis (more than once a week is excessive; once a month is inadequate) for the purpose of serious personal conversation. Such conversation does not happen at table, where the atmosphere should be more relaxed and the tone less serious. In any case, at table, our exchange is always interrupted by the telephone, the doorbell, or the dish that just fell on the floor. We need to set aside time (space and quiet) for attentive careful conversation, for real fraternal encounter and for contemplating together the work of God in our life.²⁸ But let’s avoid making community meetings into business meetings like the ones we have every day and from which we need a refreshing break. Let’s instead use our imagination; abolish meetings! Do something together that will encourage a genuinely refreshing encounter with brothers who care for each other.

5) Common prayer²⁹

Times for prayer in community

The Assumption was founded for the mission, and yet Fr. d’Alzon insisted that his community had a monastic character. I think his purpose in using this

²⁸ *Fraternal Life in community*, #29–34, on communication in community meetings.

²⁹ *Fraternal Life in community*. 12–20 and especially *The Passion for the Kingdom of God in Today’s World*, General Chapter 1993. Part One, chapter 3.

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formula was to insist on the importance of contemplation and common prayer, without in any way detracting from the apostolic inspiration of his project. “We may give ourselves to silent prayer, like Mary our Mother, or we may engage in works that contribute to the well-being of the Church, but our contemplation and our action are always united in pursuing the same goal: the extension of the reign of Jesus Christ.” (*Directory*, Pan Two, chapter 11) I have noticed that Assumptionists are always tempted in one direction or another: some are drawn to the contemplative mode (how many have considered transferring to the Carthusians or Trappists); others are drawn to the active mode (Fr. d’Alzon did admire the Jesuits for some things!). The founder would have us be drawn in both directions, not torn apart by two tendencies but integrating these two in one love for the Kingdom. Since the practice of this ideal is difficult, it is important to have the principle clear in our minds.

As Father Hervé Stephan has written: our ministry begins in the chapel in the morning when the community gathers for prayer.³⁰ The prayer of the Church, the Divine Office, has particular importance for us. Fr. d’Alzon resisted attempts to impose a common prayer schedule that would be burdensome and more suited to a cloistered life, but he insisted that the community gather to pray the Office together. Most of our communities now gather for Lauds and Vespers. In my opinion, adding another moment of common prayer each day would certainly not be contrary to our spirit. But the important question is how do we explicitate the apostolic dimension of this common prayer?

And then there is the question of the community celebration of the Eucharist. Our Rule is careful to avoid saying that the community should celebrate the Eucharist together each day; it does not even say that the Eucharist is at the heart of our common life, it says that the Eucharist is where the community renews its vitality and its unity and that the community should determine the frequency of the community Eucharist (#53). It says that the Eucharist is at the center of our prayer life (#47) and that each religious should celebrate the Eucharist on a daily basis (#54). There is some ambiguity here that has led to the practice in a good number of communities of only very occasional celebrations of the Eucharist in community. Some practical considerations have led to this (e.g. the obligation to preside for other communities on a daily basis). But if we truly believe that the Eucharist is at the center of our life as Christians, how could we not want to celebrate it

³⁰ Report to the General Chapter of 1987, III, 2.

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as a community on a very frequent basis? Is the Eucharist not a privileged place for us to gather as communities in order to celebrate and deepen our unity?

6) “Strangers no longer”

Open communities and structures for an international Congregation

A community is born when people recognize and nurture the gift of love that they share. Consequently, a “closed Christian community” is a contradiction in terms. The early Church, described in chapters 2 and 4 of the Acts of the Apostles, had a clear sense of its identity, gathering for prayer, reading the Scriptures together, and celebrating the Eucharist. Yet each day it added to its numbers, always at the service of others, burning to share the gift with those still ignorant of it. The very openness of a Christian community witnesses to the quality of the love that binds its members together. That love does not exclude “outsiders”, does not consider them as “strangers”, because they too are children of God.

But a community needs to find concrete ways to avoid turning in on itself, keeping the treasure for its exclusive benefit. At the Assumption our fraternal communities are surrounded by great numbers of good friends. How concretely do we form a broader community with them? What occasions do we have to include them in our life?³¹

Also, our local communities are part of larger communities, regions, or vice-provinces or provinces. And these in turn are part of an international family. Being part of this world-wide body in itself provides us with opportunities to be turned outward.³² How real is this for us on a daily basis?

“Internationality... This word does not designate a cold idol, but it says: Assumption, a family which lives from the same blood and spirit wherever it is... When shall we truly be interested in the lives of other brothers?... How does a Province, rich in vitality, look upon an aging Province? And in the latter, do the brothers welcome, as their own, the

³¹ Already in 1971, in “La Communauté locale apostolique – Compte-rendu pour le Conseil de Congregation de 1971” we were talking about the importance of opening our communities to our lay collaborators.

³² « Passionnés de Dieu pour un siècle nouveau – Pour nous redire notre charisme », p. 63.

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graces, joys and dynamism of the younger Provinces?”³³

It did not take Fr. d’Alzon very long to send religious abroad to serve in the missions, and from early on many of our communities were made up of religious from different countries and cultures. Recently, we have begun to emphasize the importance of such international communities. It is a way of “humanizing” globalization, providing opportunities for brothers very different in terms of culture nonetheless to live together united in heart and soul.

We need to continue studying the structures of the Congregation to be sure that they correspond to present reality, that they insure the greatest missionary élan, and that they foster the strongest sense of solidarity within the entire Congregation.

7) Being rather than doing

*Common mission: talking about the mission together, an apostolic plan, an apostolic “style”, planning, strategies, evaluation*³⁴

We easily say that the priority should be given to “being” rather than “doing”, but does that principle hold up in practice? We might respect the principle more if our “doing” were prompted, inspired and sustained by the love that we experience on a daily basis in the community in which we live. But how can that reference to the sending community be made more than a formula that we repeat but without real conviction? There are some simple means that nonetheless require a good amount of effort and sacrifice. Some of these include: working out an apostolic plan with the community, defining with the community the goals to be achieved and the “style” in which you will pursue these goals (is there an Assumptionist style?), defining with the community the strategies you will use, insisting on close collaboration among religious and laity (see Rule of Life #17), rendering an account to the community of your work, and evaluating the progress you make in achieving your goals (see Rule of Life #21). Some of these means are more indicated when the community has a common work, but others could be effective even if one is engaged outside of the community.

³³ Report to the General Chapter of 1987, First Part, p. 10.

³⁴ The text of the Chapter of 1993 is especially rich on this topic (*The Passion Kingdom of God in Today’s World*, General Chapter 1993, first part, chapter 3).

8) Communities of memory, of hope, of celebration

Remembering (the vision) and celebrating (the gift of the Spirit)

There is nothing sadder than an apostle who has forgotten the reason for which he is working, whose activity has lost its meaning. Put more positively, there is nothing more energizing than to see one’s daily activity in the context of the coming of God’s Kingdom. The stone-mason can be either carving an insignificant block of granite or building a great cathedral. Communities should be places where through prayer, through dialogue, and through the animation of the Superior, people are reminded almost on a daily basis of their ultimate goal, of the vision that sheds light on all their activity. They should be places where the gifts of the Spirit, given to each member and to the community as a whole, are named and celebrated and exploited for the sake of God’s people.³⁵ Conversation in community should regularly focus on the “bigger questions”, the great causes that energize and orient our daily activities, and sometimes challenge us and push us to conversion. This can be done in different ways, but most appropriately at the annual Local Chapter, when a community plans for the year ahead and makes decisions regarding its life and mission. The Chapter is an occasion for collegial decision-making and action. By committing themselves personally to the decisions taken by the community as a whole, the religious live their vow of obedience in concrete ways.

Conversation in community about the mission should focus on specific matters, as well as on the broader questions. Ask yourselves now and then what your *raison d’être* is as a community, how you are Assumptionist in what you do. Such conversation could also be the occasion to become more familiar with the work of each member in the community: the triumphs and the challenges, the questions and the consolations that are part of a person’s ministry. Moments of prayer could be organized to ask God’s special help in facing specific challenges or to thank Him for the special grace that has made certain things possible.

³⁵ See « Passionnes de Dieu pour un siècle nouveau – Pour nous redire notre charisme », p. 61 and J. Navarro, “Espíritu y carisma de la Asunción”, Santiago de Chile, 24–28 July 2000, p. 122, on contemplating God at work in the life of the community.

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CONCLUSION

Our reflection on fundamental convictions and helpful practices could be a useless exercise unless this prompts in us a genuine transformation. It is so difficult for us to take some distance or, ourselves, to see ourselves as others see us and especially as the Lord sees us. It's not difficult for me to imagine myself as a Pharisee, blind and deaf to Jesus and his message. But even if I hear and see, will I be able to leave everything behind and follow?

After reading through all of this, ask yourself now: what difference will it all make to me in my life, to us in our community? To what are we prepared to commit ourselves?

The final pages of this letter may be a help to you in this regard.

Fr. Richard E. Lamoureux, a.a.
Superior General
with the General Council
Feast of the Trinity. 26 May 2002

TO GO FURTHER

Stories of Community

The passages referred to below from the Acts of the Apostles (2:42-47 and 4:32-37) tell the story of the early Christian community. Other texts (in the Acts of the Apostles, chapters 5:1 -11. 11:1-18, and 15:1-12 and in many of Saint Paul’s letters) describe the kinds of problems that the early community had to confront. It’s good to remember the successes with gratitude and to deal with the challenges honestly.

As suggested early on in this letter, it might be good in community for you to share your “stories” of apostolic community. What communities have you been a part of (Assumptionist or otherwise) that have been especially nourishing and apostolically effective?

Scripture Passages

*for personal and community prayer and for community discussion*³⁶

Regarding the need for love:

Genesis 2:15–25 — what does this passage teach us about loneliness and the need for community?

Luke 1:39–56 — why did Mary need to establish contact after the Annunciation? how did she do so? what is the content of her communication with Elizabeth?

Regarding the cost of love:

Mark 9:49–50 — what does this apparently obscure analogy with salt in Mark’s gospel have to do with fraternal relations?

John 13:1–20 — what “cost” did Jesus pay in order to serve *his* brothers? what “cost” did Peter pay in letting himself be served?

³⁶ Much of the material here is taken from *Community* by Bill Hybels (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996).

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Philippians 2:1–11 — what does it mean to be like-minded, to be one in spirit and purpose, to humbly consider others better than yourself? what can we learn from Jesus about living in community?

Regarding growth in fraternal love:

John 4:4–26 — how do Jesus and the Samaritan “work” at deepening their level of communication?

Acts 2:42–47 and **4:32–37** — what “practices” helped the early Christian community to deal with its problems?

Regarding problems in community:

Genesis 4:1–10 and **11:1–9** — what was at the root of the problems between Cain and Abel and in the community at Babel?

Luke 9:46–48 — what kind of ambition is divisive in the community? what kind of ambition might be admirable and an expression of fraternal charity?

Acts of the Apostles 5:1–11 — why is it that money can cause such problems in a community? is it a source of difficulty in yours? how do you deal with it?

Romans 12:9–13 — Saint Paul suggests some of the attitudes that get in the way of love. What problems have you experienced in this regard?

Regarding openness and truth in fraternal relations:

Exodus 18:13–27 — Moses got some clear advice from his father-in-law. Do you give and take such advice well?

1 Peter 1:8–22 — in an age of tolerance and respect for all convictions, what place can “truth” possibly take in our fraternal relations?

Regarding the community’s apostolic zeal:

Luke 10:17–20 — is Jesus’ response in verse 20 surprising? does it teach you anything about motivation in ministry?

Luke 15 — what is the common message of the three stories in this chapter of Luke?

John 4:28–30 — what did the Samaritan woman’s conversation with Jesus have to do with the message she delivered back in town afterwards?

Regarding the common mission:

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1 Corinthians 12 & 13 — what are your particular spiritual gifts? what in your estimation are the spiritual gifts of your brothers? have these been recognized by the community (by your Superiors)? have these helped to unify the community or have they been a source of division? (see also Romans 12:1–21; Ephesians 4:1–16; 1 Peter 4:8–11)

Questions

to prompt discussion

Regarding COMMUNICATION & FRATERNAL LOVE

- what keeps us from opening our hearts to brothers in community?”
- what are the potential risks and the potential joys of such openness”
- who has loved me? How have they expressed it?
- whom have I loved? How do I best express that?
- in your community, take time to tell each brother what you would miss if he were not in the community

Regarding the COST OF FRATERNAL LOVE

- what makes friendship easier than fraternity?
- what makes them both “costly”? Consider your own experience in this regard.

Regarding SUPERFICIALITY & DEPTH IN FRATERNAL RELATIONS

- why are our relations in community superficial? What has helped you move beyond this?
- have you found some good questions that help you communicate better with brothers?
- how does the kind of relationship we have with God affect our fraternal relationships?

Regarding the need for HEALING in FRATERNAL RELATIONS

- what problems get in the way of good relations in community” .Are any of these linked in some way to the culture, the times in which we live...?
- have you experienced some of these problems in your own family or other communities of which you have been a part?

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- are there some attitudes or some patterns in your own way of relating to others that need healing? How might the community or a friend help you in this regard?

Regarding the need for TRUTH in our community relations

- how do you deal with brothers who are angry, needy, overly dependent, unreasonable, excessively demanding?
- can you say “no” at times?
- consider together some examples of problems that can arise in a community and how they are handled well, or handled badly

Regarding COMMUNITY OUTREACH

- how do you react to other cultures, to other generations?
- have you ever been lost, literally or figuratively? who sought you out? how did you respond?
- who do you know that is “lost”? what have you done about it?

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ICON for the Feast of Pentecost

Enamel icon, Georgian, 13th century

“When the most High descended and confused their speech, he scattered the nations. But when he distributed tongues of fire he called everyone to unity.” (Romano il Melode)

The Apostles on Pentecost were the original apostolic community. What do you see in this depiction, at once old but surprisingly modern in appearance, that reveals the unity and the zeal of those gathered in the Upper Room? Remember that icons are not illustrations of historical events, though they seek to remain faithful to the incarnate form that divine realities take. They are especially rich in symbolism and theological content and need to be “read” in this light.

Twelve are assembled on two curved benches facing each other. Echoing that horse-shoe form is an arch that frames another, crowned figure in the lower center. A female figure, on her own throne, presides the assembly. The setting is simple: what appears to be the upper portion of a wall or fortress with towers on either side lies in the background, and at the top half of a multi-colored circle from which emanate what appear to be twelve red swords. The twelve figures are all gesticulating (teaching?) except one. He and at least four others hold books. Some hold scrolls. Three are noteworthy for their white beards; two without beards appear to be younger. Who are these men? It is logical to assume that the elderly figure in a position of honor (to the right of the upper central figure) is Peter. Could four others with books be Evangelists? Could the fifth holding a book with both hands, be Paul? Scrolls usually symbolized the preaching function, while books the primary source from which the preaching was done.

The old king isolated in his own space here stands before a gold background. In most Pentecost icons, he stands before a pitch black cave. He is said to represent the King of this world, the people of various tongues and nations. Sometimes he is even shown behind bars, an image of his need for liberation.

The presiding female figure is of course Mary, but her throne, her central position, and her larger and more majestic form allude to her other significance as a figure of the Church. She does not always appear in Pentecost icons; the central space is left empty. An eschatological reference? Various explanations are given for her omission, e.g. that she had already received the gift of the Spirit at her conception. The richest explanation is that

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the twelve gathered on Pentecost are already a figure of the Church to add another would be redundant

What more can be said about this icon? The more we look, the more we see. The more we think and pray with this icon the more we are able to understand its deeper significance.