

a religious community is not a simple agglomerate of christians searching for personal perfection

The Camillian Community

Fr. Calisto Vendrame
Bucchianico, 1998

‘A religious community is not a simple agglomerate of Christians searching for personal perfection’ (*Fraternal life in Community*, n. 2).

In our Constitution (editor’s note: of the Camillians), the chapter on the community comes before the vows and ministry. A community is first and foremost seen as a communion of people. Its model is the Trinity and the community of the apostolic Church.

The Community of the Acts of the Apostles and a Religious Community

Our new Constitution has the chapter on the community precede that on the evangelical counsels, ministry and spiritual life because it believes that all these values have to be lived starting with *a communion of people who love each other in the charity of the Holy Spirit*. This chapter wants to be a contemporary version of the apostolic community and the first Camillian community. Here we encounter an opportunity to reflect upon the ‘**sources**’ in a reading anew that takes into account the new appeals to which a religious community today must be open and which helps us to locate ourselves in the perspective of our tradition.

The Community of the Acts of the Apostles

The community lived by the early Church and described in the Acts of the Apostles was referred to by the Second Vatican Council as a model for religious communities (*Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 15). Our Constitution also explicitly refers to the ‘Acts’ and states that our fraternal community is based upon the example of the apostolic Church.

The paschal and Pentecostal community of the Acts which comes together ‘in Christ’ should be understood beginning with the pre-paschal evangelical community that met together ‘with Jesus’.

As we have seen, it emerges from the gospels that many of those people who were struck by the words and the person of Jesus organised themselves into a very heterogeneous group around the person of the Teacher and followed him more or less from close at hand.

We can detect the presence of: ordinary people who followed him as much as they could and who were attracted by miracles and words which gave a new meaning to their lives; men and women sinners who felt that a new hope was born in him and

looked for a personal gesture of forgiveness; a group of women who followed him and served him with their possessions (cf. Lk 8:2-3; Mk 15: 40-41; Mt 27:55-56); his disciples in the strict sense who deepened their commitment by following Jesus and abandoned their possessions and jobs (cf. Mt 8:19-23); the disciples who were sent out to prepare the way for Jesus in every town and place that he was about to visit – they had to heal the sick and proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God (cf. Lk 10, 1-11); and the narrower group of the Twelve who completely identified with the mission and the destiny of their Teacher (cf. Mt 10:1-4; Mk 3:13-19; Lk 6:12-16).

Mk 3:14-15 is especially illuminating: they were created to *be with him* and to *be sent out*. We already have here the two axes of every Christian who wants to be Christian: *koinonìa* and *diakonìa* (communion and service).

There already existed amongst the rabbis of the time the institute of the ‘discipleship’ which required the rabbis to be followed. The disciples learned from living with their teacher, following him everywhere and placing themselves at his service. The great difference is that whereas the disciples of a rabbi had as their goal perfect knowledge and observance of the law so that they could then become themselves autonomous rabbis with all the honours that were connected to this, the disciples of Jesus sought to discover the mystery of his person, know the plan of salvation, and take on the mission and the destiny of their Teacher while always remaining disciples because there was only one Teacher (cf. Mt 10:22-25; 11:25-27; 13:11,16-17; 6,13-17,21; Jn 1:18,39,55; 2:11; 6,68-69; 13:12-17; 15: 4-17,21; 17:3).

Just as Jesus in profound communion with God was a man for other people, a man without power, without money, without a family, and strong only through the strength of truth and of justice, so also those called to live by following him had to live with the most radical adherence to him, in communion and service, free from family ties, possessions and power.

The first Christian community wanted to relive the community of the apostles who had had the privilege of living with Jesus. Memories of the promise: where two or more are gathered in my name, I will be in their midst. Certain that they were united in Jesus and experienced the presence of his Spirit, they formed a community that the book of the Acts beautifies and remembers as the ideal community of the golden times.

The life of this community is described to us in the three famous summaries (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16) but it should be understood with reference to the narration as a whole. This is the community of believers (they are called such for the first time here) of the new people of God, of those people who have adhered unconditionally to Christ to the point of making his gospel the only rule of their lives. This is a community of a living faith that lives charity to the utmost in a hope that becomes certainty.

The two axes around which the life and the activities ‘of all those who had become believers’ revolved were the same as the evangelical community – *koinonìa* e *diakonìa*: communion with God and with each other; service to the Word and fraternal help.

The profound nature of this communion lay in participation in the very Spirit of

Jesus. During Pentecost this was like a second incarnation. The Logos took on the human nature of Jesus. Now the Spirit of Jesus was liberated and given to everybody (Jn 7:39), taking them and shaping out of them a single body and making them enter into communion with the Father (Jn 17:21-23; 1 Jn 1:3). This was true fraternity but a fraternity that went beyond human motivations and capacities. This was only possible thanks to the 'mystery' of Christ who died and rose again and gave the glory that he received from the Father (Jn 17:22) and the strength to overcome selfishness and restore unity in a constant reconciliation. It was this deeper communion that was the basis of, and explained, the communion of temporal goods as well.

The Acts of the Apostles provide us with a very large number of indications. This is a community that: listens to the Word of God (2:42); is unanimous and in agreement (4:32); engages in dialogue and takes decisions together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the leadership of Peter (1:15-25; 6:2-6; 11:12-18); makes everything available to everybody (2:45; 4:22,32,34-35); prays together (2:42,46); takes part in the Eucharist (2:42); often takes meals together (2:46); is sensitive and open to the needs of poor people (5:15-15); takes care of the sick (5:15-16); experiences the presence of the Spirit (4:31); deserves the esteem of the people (4:33; 5:13); receives the favour and the approval of God (2:43; 5:12); proclaims the resurrection of Christ (4:33) with courage and frankness; bears witness and converts (2:47; 5:14; cf. Jn 17:21); is informed and prays for life (4:23-30); is free in giving (4:36; 5:4); does not allow a double life (5:1-11); lives in joy and simplicity (2,46); takes the things of God seriously (2:43; 5:11); does not choose its brethren but welcomes all those who are called by God who does have not preferences as regards people: those who fear Him and practise justice, to whichever people they belong, are accepted by God (At 10:34-36; cf. Gal 2:28).

It is certainly the case that this is a rather idealistic description. Indeed, the sixth chapter attests to a grave tension between Jews and Hellenists, a tension that was perceived from outside as well. A tension between the more closed Jews and the more open Hellenists was also expressed in relation to the question which the assembly of Jerusalem (Acts 15) solved at the level of principle but which at a practical level troubled the Christian community for a long time, threatening to break it in two. Even the giants Peter and Paul clashed on the practical case of the attitude to be adopted towards Jewish practices (Gal 2:11-14). When work has to be done with other people, the preference is to join people with similar views, and this allows the adoption of the same work criteria. Thus Barnabas and Paul, who are great friends and companions of the apostolate, dissent on the advisability of taking Mark with them for the visit they are about to make to the cities that they had previously evangelised together, even separating from each other (Acts 36-40). However when dissent undermines fraternal communion, the community stops, meets and clarifies the situation because above all else (*prò panton*) intense mutual charity has to be conserved (1 Pt 4:8).

The Religious Community

The communal ideal described by the Acts of the Apostles was never lived by all Christians in all its aspects. The Pentecostal Church, in a re-reading of the evangelical community, applied to all the faithful what had been lived at the level of the college of the Twelve. With the expansion of Christianity it became increasingly difficult to live the form of community of the origins. However, the Pentecostal community always remained a point of reference, a call to live the fullness of the gift of the Spirit in the deepest fraternal communion.

Religious life, ever since its first appearance (after a first attempt that failed to gain support involving living as hermits), in its commitment to live the Gospel in a radical way was attracted by the fascination of the apostolic community and moved by a wish to relive its experience. In the oldest documents the reference to the summaries of the Acts are explicit. Di Pacomio, who is seen as the father of coenobitic life, had the following said about him by tradition: 'The life that our Father lived was the higher life of the Apostles'.

Thus 'religious life, in its various expression, has always attributed an essential role to the community. Before the so-termed religious vows were explicitly perceived and structured as such, common life was already a lived and organised reality. Indeed, the community was the context in which these vows were born and developed'.

Down the centuries various kinds of religious communities developed. We can discern three principal ones.

In the **first**, the community was explicitly seen as an essential evangelical value, as the setting where the vocation to the radicality of the spirit of the beatitudes was lived. Religious vocation was expressed as a call to live the Gospel in fraternity.

In the **second**, the community was arranged to facilitate encounter with God, to celebrate in a worthy way service to the Almighty – *opus Dei*. ***St. Augustine saw the value of the community in charity itself lived in relation to Trinitarian charity and the fraternal communion of the Acts***, even though the community existed to protect the spirit and priestly mission.

In the **third** we have the so-termed apostolic community, that is to say the community directed towards the apostolate, to '*cura animarum*'. In this community, rather than coming together with a view to *opus Dei*, its members united around service to neighbour. The Society of Jesus was typical of this kind of community and was conceived with a view to apostolic service. This had an enormous influence on other apostolic communities. It represented a clear break with the monastic model (something that monks and nuns were not able to achieve) by eliminating choirs and very many other common practices. St. Ignatius saw the Society of Jesus as an army engaged in a mission of salvation. Everything was slimmed down but on the other hand everything was foreseen and prescribed in detail so that the religious could deal with dispersion when they were on their own. There was therefore a solid personal formation, strong links with fellow companions, and above all strict obedience to a strongly centralised regime where the Superior had to make up for the frailty of a community that was permanently in mission. It was certainly the case that in this kind of community work counted more than being together. And the community ran the

risk of being reduced to the role of being a mere instrument.

As one can see, religious life, even though it arose to be in the forefront of things as a sign and an appeal to the whole of the Church to live the message of the Gospel in its original purity, has in its turn been the daughter of the Church and has been subjected to the influence of the forms of ecclesiology which down the centuries, with their lights and shadows, have created various images of the Church.

The Camillian Community

It was in this form of religious life and in the Church of the end of the sixteenth century that the first Camillian community was born and organised, even though because of the originality of its guiding inspiration it required a structure all of its own. Framed within the heavy rules of the Order of the Regular Clerics, the 'little plant' of Camillus must have felt like David in Saul's chariot, even though it ended up by carrying that little plant with faith and devotion.

To have a better understanding of the thinking of the Founder it seems to me that we must distinguish two moments of the Camillian community. In the first there was a slim and flexible community on a family scale. This was dreamed of to begin with by Camillus and was lived by the 'Company of Servants of the Sick'. In the second moment the community was structured in line with its new status as a clerical Order. It was certainly the case that the essence of the first community was also to be found in the second. But when there fell on it all the legal responsibilities of an officially recognised clerical Order, our forerunners, starting with the Founder, felt a constant need for help provided by experts of the Holy See and of already established Orders, and in particular the Jesuits, to whom Camillus practically entrusted the juridical organisation that was needed for his religious Order. 'When some doubts arose, regarding government and observance, it was enough for him to be told that the Fathers of the Company did it for him to accept it and have it implemented' (Vms p. 364).

What always reflected the thinking of the Founder was that type of community that was built around Christ suffering in the sick. His *opus Dei* was service to the sick, in whom he saw and served Christ. As was the case with monasteries, the life of the community was organised with a view to the *opus Dei* (the celebration of the liturgy) and as was the case with clerical Orders it was structured around *cura animarum*: in the company of Camillus the life of the community was polarised around service to Christ in the sick.

Despite the limitations of the epoch and the ambiguity of an old structure for a new Order, we have before us a community that does not seem to have been reduced to a mere means or instrument. It was certainly the case that Camillus saw the community as an indispensable setting for the formation of very good Ministers of the Sick and as an ideal place to become perfect religious (cf. *Lettere di S. Camillo*). *Diakonia* seemed to prevail over *koinonia*. But the value of the community as such did not escape him, even though he did not remember to cite the summaries of the Acts. Otherwise one could not sufficiently explain the fact that he gave orders that his

religious should only go to hospitals on alternate days ('one day to Martha and one day to Mary Magdalene') and one week every month had to be spent in the community.

We live in the full climate of the Second Vatican Council and to us it seems strange not to find a chapter on the community in the first documents of the Order. Nor does the historian Fr. Vanti give much space to it in his books on the life and the spirit of St. Camillus. But from a picture of the whole we can clearly see that the Founder felt that the institute was a real community and thought the same about the individual houses. Of notable significance was the frequent gathering of his first companions around the crucifix, the mutual commitment to each other in life and death, the integration of the new professed into the 'mystical body of our religion', and the laying of so much emphasis on fraternal charity.

Leaving to one side the limitations of the epoch, we will now try to engage in a re-reading of some characteristics of that community – characteristics that still maintain their value.¹ The community of Camillus: was made up of people inspired by God who had received 'a capital of grace from the Holy Spirit (formula of 19.6.1599); was made up of people who had decided to die to themselves in order to live only for Jesus Christ; international (in addition to the Italians there were Spaniards, Frenchmen, Englishmen, Flemings and Irish); was new and of great contemporary relevance and met the challenges of the epoch in a creative and original way; met the aspirations of young men who wanted to spend their lives in a valuable mission; generated great enthusiasm and brought forth very many vocations which meant that the house in Rome had an 'overwhelming number of people' (Vms, chap. C); dedicated a great deal time to spending time together in prayer and 'reasoning' – 'when these exercises were over they all went out together, like so many seraphim inflamed by charity to serve the poor'; provided overall service to the sick (the isolated work of a solitary chaplain was inconceivable); was open to those most in need; was able to free the religious for the urgent needs of society (the plague, disasters, war); lived in a climate of joy – as Camillus wrote: 'Our Lord grant that I take that fruit from my happy state...and know that by grace of Our Lord that I am so happy that I would not exchange my state for the whole world, and I would not leave it for any other' (Scritti, p. 340); was one in which the young religious were strongly interested in what was decided in the General Chapters (see the tragedy of the twenty-five students of the house in Naples, Vms chap. XIV); was open to the local Church and the universal Church; was open to working with secular people (Camillus founded an association of laymen; many people were induced to visit the sick); and served in love asking for no payment in return.

Very many other characteristics could be highlighted. It is a joy to see how our Constitution understood them in its wonderful chapter on our community. In that chapter emphasis is laid upon fraternal love which has to be lived '*ante omnia et super omnia*'.

In the gospel one can discern four levels of love: 1. loving one's neighbour as

¹ See for this part also E. SPOGLI, *La prima comunità camilliana*, extractum ex Eph. Claretianum, vol. XV, Rome, 1975; H. DAMMIG, 'Die Kamillianische Gemeinschaft im Einsatz', in *C.I.C. deutsche Ausgabe*, 1979, n.6, pp. 14-37.

oneself (Mt 7:12; Mk 12:31; Lk 6:31;10:27); 2. loving one's neighbour as one loves Jesus (Mt 25:31-46); loving one's neighbour as one is loved by Jesus, as one is loved by God (Jn 15:9-17); and 4. loving each other like the Persons of the Most Holy Trinity (Jn 17:21).