

**How good and how pleasant it is
when brothers dwell together as one**

(Psalm 133)



Letter on Brotherhood

This icon comes from the monastery of Bawit in Middle Egypt. Dated to the 8th century, it represents Christ placing his hand on the shoulder of Abbot Mena, the superior of the community, in a sign of brotherhood. In his left hand the abbot holds a scroll which may contain the rule of the monastery for which he holds responsibility (Department of Egyptian Antiquities, the Louvre Museum, Paris).

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Letter on Brotherhood

Letter # 3 of the Superior General

*« As I have loved you,
so you also should love one another »
(Jn 13:34).*

INTRODUCTION

Writing a letter on brotherhood is a way of explicitating what we mean when we speak of Assumptionists as « men of communion ». Brotherhood is a way of putting into practice the commandment to love one's neighbor. It is also another way of saying « Church », the community of believers, the People of God. But brotherhood is a goal as well. It is a question of making progress regarding respect for what is different and other. Most of all, it is a way to discover more deeply God who is the Father of us all in Jesus Christ, his only son, our brother.

Many times when visiting communities, I have noticed that we have a hard time spontaneously employing the word « brothers ». Quite often we use some approximative synonym like « confrères » to designate those who share religious consecration with us. Why do we have a preference for using a word like confrère, when in fact this word has a meaning different from what we actually intend to say? Why this reluctance to use the language of brotherhood?

The dictionary says of the word « confrère » that it refers to a « person who belongs to a profession, a society, a company, considered in relation with other members of this same group ». It is evident that it has a non-religious, secular meaning, whereas the word « brother », in its many senses, is more in keeping with the religious tradition. It is first of all a ques-

tion of individuals having the same father, then secondarily of persons with whom we share a common destiny. I believe that there is a certain fear to use a word that plunges us into the mystery of our divine sonship and relationship as brothers. It is a fear that pushes us to use paraphrases or approximations in order that we might avoid the actual reality.

This purpose of this letter is to reflect on brotherhood. As such it is constitutive of the Church and of our faith. We are brothers because we are sons of the same Father. And Christ is the eldest of a multitude of brothers. A remark Voltaire once made, often quoted in our communities, has also struck me. He is speaking of monks and he describes community life in the following way in a story entitled *L'homme aux quarante écus* (*The Man of Forty Coins* or, more exactly, *Living on a Shoestring*), « There is a rather well-known saying that claims that monks are men who gather together without knowing each other, live together without loving each other, and die without being missed » (« *C'est une maxime assez connue que les moines sont des gens qui s'assemblent sans se connaître, vivent sans s'aimer, et meurent sans se regretter* »). Just how true is this of us? Is this the picture we project to those who do not know the richness and the beauty of fraternal life?

We would do well to reflect on brotherhood because it is constitutive of our faith in Jesus Christ. This letter is addressed to all religious, but also to all the lay members of the Alliance, as I will do from now on when I write to the Congregation. Brotherhood cannot be fully lived unless its embrace reaches out to all. Lay Assumptionists, too, are called to live fully the call to universal brotherhood according to our spirit.

I. GOING TO THE ROOTS OF BROTHERHOOD

The word 'brotherhood' in the history of the Church

Very early on the word 'brotherhood' was used to speak of the Church. The two terms were used interchangeably. It is the Letters of St. Peter that bear clearest witness to this usage. 1 Peter 5:8-9, «... your enemy the devil is on the prowl... looking for someone to devour. Stand up to him, strong in faith and in the knowledge that it is the same kind of suffering that the community of your brothers throughout the world is undergoing » (New Jerusalem Bible). Also 1 Peter 2:17, « Give honor to all; love the community (of brothers)(New American Bible) ». In many languages, the word 'brotherhood' has two meanings: it most often signifies the virtue of loving one's brother but we tend to forget that 'brotherhood' is also the community of brothers. Recent translations do not make a distinction between the two. The Greek words used are very clear: *adelphotès* is different from *philadephia*.

A contemporary theologian, Fr. Michel Dujarier, has spent a lot of time studying the concept of brotherhood, and is about to publish a huge tome on his research. Without getting into details, let me summarize the major lines of his thesis. The word 'brotherhood' was a strict synonym of the word 'church' in the first centuries of Christianity. This lasted till the fourth century, but gradually this usage waned without ever disappearing completely, only becoming less and less frequent. At the beginning of the seventh century the Church was still being called « the holy Brotherhood ».

It was theologians who would take hold of the concept in order to develop a Christology of brotherhood. Using it to

designate the community of believers would thus become secondary. His major arguments go as follow:

- By his incarnation Christ took on our human 'brotherhood'
- The sacraments of initiation introduce us, by the work of the Holy Spirit, into brotherhood with Christ
- Thus we truly become brothers and sisters in Christ.

What is apparent is that brotherhood in Christ is the Church. The ecclesial community is made up of brothers and sisters of Christ and it is by her and in her that other brothers and sisters will be born.

An author like Maximus of Turin († 420) would say things quite clearly, « And so, in the brotherhood of charity, they possessed all things in common, since --- and let us not forget --- brotherhood in Christ is something greater than blood brotherhood. For blood brotherhood refers only to a likeness of body, while brotherhood in Christ manifests a oneness of heart and soul, as it is written: *But among the believers there was one heart and one soul* (Acts 4:32). He is truly a believer, therefore, who is related no so much by body as by spiritual concord. He is a true brother, I say, who has the same spirit and desire as his brother. And so, as I have remarked, brotherhood in Christ is better than blood brotherhood. Blood brothers are sometimes each other's enemies, while brothers in Christ are always at peace; the ones divide things common to themselves by rivalry, the others share even what is their own in joy; the ones often despise their brothers in what they possess together, the others frequently receive strangers. »¹

¹ Saint Maximus of Turin, *Homily XVII, 1*. Vol. 50 Ancient Christian Writers, ed. Boniface Ramsey. Paulist Press, 1989, p.42.

Even if the New Testament rarely uses the word 'brotherhood' to designate the Church, all of Jesus' teaching is crystal clear on the matter. Christian life is *par excellence* fraternal life because God is our Father and Jesus is the « first-born among many brothers » (Rm 8:29). Do not forget that whoever does the will of the Father is a brother to Jesus (Mk 6:3ff). All one needs to do is to re-read the gospels and the other writings of the New Testament to discover that brotherhood is the exemplary value of the Christian faith. In this year of the consecrated life, might we not reread the gospels and other New Testament writings to discover in them the exemplary value of brotherhood?

II. BUILDING AUTHENTIC BROTHERHOOD

The Assumption and brotherhood

We like to speak of our Congregation as a family. Nevertheless, it is rare to find the word 'brotherhood' in the writings of Fr. d'Alzon and the major documents of the Congregation. Still, it must be acknowledged that the *Rule of Life* often uses the word 'fraternal'; one need only take a look at the index for proof of this.

The spirit of Fr. d'Alzon aligns well with this desire for brotherhood that goes to the heart of the Gospel message of reconciliation. I invite everyone to reread the reflection sheet, « Brothers in Jesus Christ with Emmanuel d'Alzon » that was composed to enhance the celebration of the bicentennial of our founder's birth. There you will find some interesting recommendations for texts to be read and quotes to be pondered. When d'Alzon speaks of family, he wants everyone to find his place within the Congregation and desires that

relations be guided by fraternal charity and simplicity. Other terms might also be used to describe interpersonal relations within the community ---- frankness/openness, selflessness, freedom, forgiveness, mutual respect, etc. But it is faith in Jesus Christ that is the underlying and ultimate link between members. In a letter addressed to the students at the Collège de l'Assomption in Nîmes, d'Alzon recalls the decisive role of faith in Jesus Christ for living the bond of brotherhood,

*« Let me tell you something that you must keep in mind in considering charity. Men, once they are no longer brothers in Christ, start acting like wolves with one another... »*².

In the *Directory*, in the chapter entitled, « On Charity », our founder reminds us of the importance of relationships founded on faith,

*« Among all, there must reign a tender love, full of reverence, respect and seriousness; we should try to see our fellow-religious as living images of Christ, temples of the Holy Spirit and children of Mary, the mother of us all »*³.

*« ...may we all succeed, by cultivating a humble spirit of charity, in forging those bonds of brotherhood which should be the hallmark of Christ's servants, in whichever section of the vineyard they are called upon to labour »*⁴.

There is, therefore, a tradition of brotherhood at the Assumption, even if our Congregation has been designated a

² Emmanuel d'ALZON, Letter of December 4, 1869 to the students at the Collège de l'Assomption.

³ Emmanuel d'ALZON, *Écrits spirituels*, p.70.

⁴ Emmanuel d'ALZON, *Écrits spirituels*, p.649.

« clerical » congregation. We still desire to live a fraternal life characterized by simplicity and frankness/openness. Moreover, there is no difference in degree or quality between brothers, be they ordained or not. Whether some members are priests or not, the Congregation is a congregation of brothers equal in dignity. I take advantage of this letter to underline just how much need we have of emphasizing clearly the priority of our religious consecration over any status that comes from ordination. Religious life needs men who are willing to commit themselves to it without *a priori* seeking priestly ordination. There is a certain kind of clericalism that threatens us and that alienates us from the People of God. An Assumptionist commits himself wholeheartedly to brotherhood by his religious consecration. Might it not be helpful for us to take another look at the questions that Fr. d'Alzon poses in chapter seven of the *Directory* on fraternal charity?

Brotherhood and mission

Christianity is the proclamation of the Gospel as a message of universal brotherhood. It is a message that finds its origin in its faith in Christ, first-born of a multitude of brothers. In the current context of globalization, Christians must encourage and spread a spirit of universal brotherhood which transcends every boundary, while teaching all to respect cultural difference.

Jesus asks us to announce his Good News and this is a message of conversion. It is a message founded on the universal relationship of God with men in Jesus Christ.

There is a tension between the brotherhood that already exists by virtue of incorporation into Christ by baptism and

the desire to spread it to all humanity. The Church has boundaries; the Kingdom does not. One who is baptized is one's brother, but we cannot live without wanting the Good News to be proclaimed to all. This what our *Rule of Life* says, « The apostolate of our Congregation inserts our communities into the Church's mission of gathering all men and women into the People of God » (#13).

There is often an inevitable tension between community life and the proclamation of the Kingdom. This causes problems for some, but an Assumptionist knows that the Kingdom must grow in him and around him. It is of some interest for us to take a look at papal teaching,

« For some, 'building community' is felt as an obstacle to mission, almost a waste of time in matters of secondary importance. All must be reminded that fraternal communion, as such, is already an apostolate; in other words, it contributes directly to the work of evangelization. The sign *par excellence* left us by Our Lord is that of lived fraternity: 'By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (Jn. 13:35) »⁵.

So brotherhood is a sign that contributes to the proclamation of the Good News. No one can pretend, for apostolic reasons, to disengage himself from fraternal life in community. No, fraternal life is an integral part of our commitment in behalf of the Kingdom.

⁵ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Fraternal Life in Community*, #56, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_02021994_fraternal-life-in-community_en.html

But we must go farther yet and say that there is a built-in requirement of brotherhood that makes of each of us a missionary. We are men and women with the pressing duty to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.

We must recall the great last judgment scene as it is described by the evangelist Matthew (25:31-46), « Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least *brothers* of mine, you did for me » (Mt 25:40). Our faith impels us to act in behalf of the neediest and to recognize in them brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. Brotherhood is indeed the proper name of the Church.

How does brotherhood impel us to act in behalf of the neediest and to recognize in each of them a universal brother?

Brotherhood and the service of authority

Fraternal life needs a brother « who renders the service of making a final decision » (*Rule of Life* #42). There is no religious life without appointing a religious who exercises authority. But is this exercise of authority compatible with the profound meaning of brotherhood? The decades following the Second Vatican Council have been marked by widespread opposition of authority in all its forms. Today the tension has subsided, but some legitimate questions still remain.

« Normally we cannot truly be in touch with God but through the mediation of one's brother, who is also himself marked by weakness. Is this not the economy of the Incarnation?... Whence, as one might imagine, the issue that obedience poses. It grows out a deep inner movement of faith: be-

lieving that, while living profoundly the risk of brotherhood, one will hear in the advice, the recommendations, and the clear orders one receives from one's 'brothers', the voice of the Lord himself. Religious obedience is thus explained by the risk of believing, together with others, in the powerful meaning that the Scriptures give to the word 'believe': not only to adhere to a doctrine that transcends our understanding, but to fix in the depths of our personal story the dynamics of Jesus' story »⁶.

Brotherhood does not exclude authority. It actually reinforces it to the extent that one finds his true place in the community. Religious life is not organized like political democracies, even though there is in our way of life the opportunity for everyone to express what he thinks and to have that taken into account in decision-making. Assumptionist religious life is different from Dominican life. The Order of Preachers insists a lot on a democratic model: priors are elected by their brothers. At the Assumption, we have a system of government that underscores consultation. A brother renders the service of a decision after having weighed various opinions and prayed to God for the grace of a good discernment. The Assumption is characterized by consensus, not compromise, even if these two words are close in meaning. Compromise is a decision that relies on negotiation and arbitration. Consensus is a slow process that is based on the **mutual conversion** of the parties involved. Consensus makes room for the Holy Spirit. It allows everyone to see that the truth does not belong to one person alone, but is already a fruit of communion.

⁶ J.M. TILLARD, « Aux sources de l'obéissance religieuse » in *Nouvelle revue théologique*, n°98, 1976, p.836

We are called to enter into this culture of discussion and exchange in order to discover the opinion of others, a process that encourages free expression and avoids all bias. We must look at our way of governing, conscious that all must receive an opportunity to speak, especially those who by character or formation are least apt to express themselves. Chapters --- local, provincial, and general --- are the privileged moments to establish consensus. It is often a long and painstaking exercise that lets us discern the signs of the times and brings us to listen to the Word of God. It is a question of a fraternal exercise characterized by coresponsibility and charity.

Brotherhood facilitates a healthy exercise of authority. We understand that as superiors, local, provincial, or general, we are named for a specific period of time and that our mandate will come to an end. Being a superior means forgetting oneself for the common good. I am convinced that the service of authority is carried out in a broad climate of brotherhood. But we must still go further along the road of self-forgetfulness. This responsibility of trust calls for « supernatural » men as Fr. d'Alzon was wont to say, individuals who put their personal dreams and ambitions in second place.

Where does obedience find its place within the context of brotherhood? I think that religious find Christ in obedience, and the reflection of the Kingdom of God in community. Just as Christ is the human face of the Father, brotherhood is the human face of Christ. The service that a superior renders is therefore one of communion; it is meant to help a religious come to full maturity in his relationship with others in the image of God. In other words, the role of the superior is to

« strengthen fraternal communion »⁷. As its primary task authority seeks to build a « fraternal community in Christ, in which God may be sought and loved above all else »⁸.

There are some cultures that are « authority-based » and others that are « community-based ». In these contexts the religious community is called to be a sign of respect and promotion of the person. Authentic brotherhood challenges models of authority that do not have as their aim respect for the person and that trample differences. Brotherhood fosters openness and respectfully welcomes differences.

« A superior must therefore be, above all, a spiritual person, convinced of the primacy of the spiritual, both with respect to personal life and for the development of fraternal life; in other words, he or she must know that the more the love of God increases in each individual heart, the more unity there will be between hearts. »⁹

At the Assumption, we know the importance of dialogue and exchange. Superiors must be more prepared to listen than to speak. Respectfully listening to one's brothers is the indispensable condition of good government. Decisions cannot be taken without exchange and dialogue.

Vita consecrata reminds us that brotherhood is the primordial theological locus (« God-enlightened space ») in which one experiences the presence of the Risen Christ (#42).

⁷ *Vita consecrata*, #43b.

⁸ Code of Canon Law, can.619.

⁹ « Fraternal Life in Community » #50a.

« In community life, then, it should in some way be evident that, more than an instrument for carrying out a specific mission, fraternal communion is a *God-enlightened space (theologale esse spatium)* in which to experience the hidden presence of the Risen Lord (Mt 18:20). This comes about through the mutual love of all the members of the community, a love nourished by the word and by the Eucharist, purified in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and sustained by prayer for unity, the special gift of the Spirit to those who obediently listen to the Gospel. It is the Spirit himself who leads the soul to the experience of communion with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:3), a communion which is the source of fraternal life. »

Our religious life is the presence of the Risen Christ insofar as we are able to live as brothers, that is to say, united by the bond of charity.

Forgiveness builds brotherhood

« We must constantly transcend our divisions and limitations so that we can learn to accept and forgive each other » (*Rule of Life #8*).

I often repeat Jesus' words, « Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste » (Mt 12:25). Reconciliation is a priority for every one of our communities. We have too many divisions, and grudges and resentment make reconciliation and forgiveness difficult. The straw of anger becomes the beam of hatred, says St. Augustine (*Rule VI,1*).

Forgiveness is necessary for the fraternal life. Do our communities give sufficient place to forgiveness and reconcili-

ation? Jean Vanier, the founder of l'Arche, communities where handicapped persons live with the able-bodied, wrote a beautiful book entitled, *La communauté lieu du pardon et de la fête* (Community: A Place of Forgiveness and Celebration). There can be no real rejoicing in community if there is no place for forgiveness. Reconciliation is a must in order to live faith authentically in Jesus Christ. We all have to ask pardon for our failures in order to live a truly fraternal life.

We know well that Saint Augustine insisted on harmony and unity. He ranks forgiveness among the essential points of the fraternal life. His *Rule* is quite clear on this matter and reminds us that those who do not want to forgive have no place in community life. « If someone never wants to ask for forgiveness or does so without meaning it, he is out of place in the monastery even though he is not expelled (Mt 18, 35). Therefore, spare yourselves harsh words » (*Rule of Saint Augustine*, VI, 2).

Sometimes I am really taken aback to see how old quarrels stay alive in certain religious houses. Too often we tend to engage in gratuitous criticism of our brothers. Are we sufficiently aware that such an attitude, which can go so far as denigrating a brother, is an assault on brotherhood?

Pope Francis himself has made this observation as well and he speaks about it in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium*,

« Those wounded by historical divisions find it difficult to accept our invitation to forgiveness and reconciliation, since they think that we are ignoring their pain or are asking them to give up their memory and ideals. But if they see the witness of authentically fraternal and reconciled communities,

they will find that witness luminous and attractive. It always pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities, and even consecrated persons, can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideas at all costs, even to persecutions which appear as veritable witch hunts. Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act? »¹⁰

The Pope's insistence on this matter invites us to examine our conscience with regard to our grudges and divisions. Is there not a tendency not to forgive, a tendency that erodes living in community? I have been able to observe during my canonical visits that certain events, quite old --- as a matter of fact, some that have lasted decades --- are still open sores. Brotherhood cannot exist unless forgiveness is given and received. I believe that those responsible for vocation ministry must be particularly attentive to the capacity for forgiveness among candidates to religious life. If this capacity is absent, it would be better not to encourage someone to pursue a vocation at the Assumption. This reflection of the Pope leads us to speak of reconciliation. Forgiveness given and forgiveness received are pillars on which brotherhood is built.

« The reconciled person sees in God the Father of all, and, as a consequence, is spurred on to live a life of fraternity open to all. In Christ, the other is welcomed and loved as a son or daughter of God, as a brother or sister, not as a stranger, much less as a rival or even an enemy. In God's fam-

¹⁰ *Evangelii gaudium*, #100,
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

ily, where all are sons and daughters of the same Father, and, because they are grafted to Christ, *sons and daughters in the Son*, there are no 'disposable lives'. All men and women enjoy an equal and inviolable dignity. All are loved by God. All have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, who died on the Cross and rose for all. This is the reason why no one can remain indifferent before the lot of our brothers and sisters »¹¹.

«Religious brotherhood,» continued the Pope, «with all its possible diversity, is an experience of love that goes beyond conflicts. Community conflicts are inevitable: in a certain sense they need to happen, if the community is truly living sincere and honest relationships. That's life. It does not make sense to think of living in a community in which there are brothers who are not experiencing difficulties in their lives. Something is missing from communities where there is no conflict (...) Brotherhood is a delicate thing. In the hymn of First Vespers of the Solemnity of Saint Joseph in the Argentinian breviary the Saint is asked to take care of the Church with *ternura de eucaristía*, 'Eucharistic tenderness.' This is how we should treat brothers: with Eucharistic tenderness.... Tenderness does us good. Eucharistic tenderness does not mask conflict but rather helps us to confront it like people »¹².

¹¹ *Fraternity, the Foundation and Pathway to Peace*. Message of Pope Francis for the Celebration of the World Day for Peace, January 1, 2014, #3,

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20131208_messaggio-xlvi-giornata-mondiale-pace-2014.html.

¹² *Wake up the World!* November 29, 2013, conversation of Pope Francis with the superiors general,

http://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articoli_download/extra/Wake_up_the_world.pdf, pp 10, 12.

Forgiveness is essential for all groups of human beings. It also goes to the heart of the Lord's Prayer. How can one forget this call to forgiveness from the mouth of Jesus himself? Today it is forgiveness that can advance the way to reconciliation. We Assumptionists are present in the Great Lakes region of East Africa. We desire to be « artisans of peace » and our small community in Goma along the Rwandan border has as its mission this work for peace and reconciliation. Recently the Pope had occasion to welcome the bishops of Rwanda and he recalled the importance of forgiveness. But how can we be artisans of peace if we ourselves do not first live in communities that are reconciled and open to diversity? More and more, internationality will be the witness of our capacity to live as brothers.

Whether it be in our families or in our parishes, we suffer, without often admitting it, from attitudes that are nothing more than a practical negation of Christian brotherhood. Certain individuals suffer from « sclerosis of the heart », as the Bible says (*sklerocardia*), that is to say, hardness of heart, a condition impervious to the grace of forgiveness. A hardened heart --- this is what brings a religious not to practice reconciliation; this is what destroys brotherhood.

Fraternal life allows us to practice *fraternal correction*. Such a practice is meant to open our hearts so that we might humbly acknowledge our sins, convert, and return to true life. Too often, in order to maintain our peace of mind, we dare not practice such correction and we allow our brothers to flounder. We have a great responsibility in fostering the growth in holiness of each of our brothers. Let us not forget fraternal correction. « There should not be any brother in the world who has sinned, however much he may have possibly sinned, who, after he has looked into your eyes, would go

away without having received your mercy, if he is looking for mercy. And if he were not to seek mercy, you should ask him if he wants mercy. And if he should sin thereafter a thousand times before your very eyes, love him more than me so that you may draw him back to the Lord »¹³.

What place do forgiveness and the courage to engage in fraternal correction hold in my life?

III. THE « LIVING TOGETHER »

The social dimension of the faith

To live together is difficult, but Christian brotherhood is hope for a humanity reconciled and at peace. There is a political aspect to brotherhood that must not be excluded from our considerations. The Church does not subscribe to any particular party or ideology; its program is found in the Gospel and in the Lord's command that we love one another while loving God with all our strength. Too often the Church has taken the side of the rich and the powerful, but its history is also made up of the multitude of those who have opposed misery and oppression. The debate that took place over liberation theology has quieted down and the social teaching of recent popes has shown the inadequacies of communist doctrines as well as the ideologies of liberal capitalism. Human dignity is found in universal brotherhood. Each Christian must prepare himself within the city to build up a just and

¹³ Saint Francis of Assisi, *Letter to a Minister*,
<http://www.franciscans.ie/spirituality/st-francis-writings#4>.

fraternal world. This imposes political choices. The Christian is not to be holed up in the sacristy.

« In the end the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus is the revelation of the unconditional love of God... *When the revelation of God's love (the Kingdom) meets its appropriate response in man's trusting acceptance of this love (repentance), there begins a mighty movement of personal and societal liberation which sweeps through human history. The movement brings freedom inasmuch it liberates each individual from the inadequacies and obsessions that shackle him...It fosters brotherhood because it allows the liberated to pay attention to each individual in an authentic community. And it leads to social justice, because it pushes every true community to adopt just social structures which alone can bring about liberty and brotherhood.* »¹⁴

Christian brotherhood cannot be conceived as a refusal to get involved in the city. To the contrary, the Kingdom of God is not an escape from temporal realities, but their transformation. Christian faith has a political dimension because it gives rise to a struggle against all inequality and exclusion. It is the spirit of the Beatitudes that pushes us to transform the world into a place where greater peace and justice reign.

Is our community playing an active role in this transformation of society?

¹⁴ George SOARES-PRABHU, « *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society* », cité in Bruno Chenu « Au service de la vérité », Bayard, 2013, p.426 ("The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New Society,"

The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society. Ed. *Bibliography* lxii D. S. Amalorpavadass, Bangalore: National, Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1981, 579-608).

The spirituality of communion

Vita consecrata speaks of religious life as *signum fraternitatis*. In the theological sense of the term, the consecrated life is a sign of brotherhood. Obviously this gives us pause for reflection. Were we sufficiently aware of this responsibility when we committed ourselves to religious life? Pope John Paul II has a beautiful reflection on the sign of the Trinitarian life which is part and parcel of community life. It occurs in #41 of the encyclical,

« The consecrated life can certainly be credited with having effectively helped to keep alive in the Church the obligation of fraternity as a form of witness to the Trinity. By constantly promoting fraternal love, also in the form of common life, the consecrated life has shown that *sharing in the Trinitarian communion can change human relationships* and create a new type of solidarity. In this way it speaks to people both of the beauty of fraternal communion and of the ways which actually lead to it. Consecrated persons live ‘for’ God and ‘from’ God, and precisely for this reason they are able to bear witness to the reconciling power of grace, which overcomes the divisive tendencies present in the human heart and in society. »

An Assumptionist religious, now deceased, Fr. Camille Durand, used to say in his retirement house that he loved community life more and more. I once asked him, « Why ? » and he answered, « community life is preparing me for the Trinitarian life because such a life is a communion of persons ». How beautiful and profound! Are we aware of this grace which is given to us already to live the Trinitarian life by virtue of our life in community? I think a lot of conflict and tension would be resolved were we to be more aware of this participation in the divine life.

The mystery of brotherhood also points to the mystery of divine paternity. If we are brothers, it is because we already

have a same Father. A serious community life invites us to contemplate the mystery of the love of a God who never stops the gift of himself to his children.

Brotherhood is incompatible with partisanship and cliques in religious life for these arise at the price of excluding one or another brother. We have to be very attentive to the possible risks to community life when such exclusion occurs. There is no *a priori* 'Members Only' criteria for living the religious life and choosing our brothers, whether that be race, culture, language, education or the status of one's origin. Authentic catholicity is the respect of differences. We have to pay close attention in this matter because human beings have a tendency to erect barriers to protect themselves from difference.

Given that the Congregation is increasingly dedicated to living under the sign of ***internationality***, we must reinforce our reflection on brotherhood. Our communities desire to bear witness to the reconciliation of cultures and of peoples. Today many communities enjoy a wealth of brothers living together from multiple cultural or national backgrounds, whether in Europe, Africa, the Americas, or Asia. Brothers learn to live together when respecting differences. But there is still a long row to hoe if we are deepen this respect. Too often a culture — usually that of the country that welcomes — dominates the others. I encourage the constitution of multicultural communities where pluralism is the rule. We must learn to live with others and to respect them. It is one of the urgent challenges of our day.

The general chapter of 2011 reminds us that « fraternal life in community is a unique way of witnessing to the faith » (#10). Are not the breaking of bread, of the Word, of prayer and of life ---- truly a fundamental sign of our communion as brothers?

Eucharistic brotherhood

Brotherhood exists in view of communion. There is a sacrament that is the sign of unity and, as we know well, that is the Eucharist. Augustine insisted a lot on brotherhood:

« It follows that the whole redeemed city, that is to say, the congregation or communion of the saints, is offered to God as our sacrifice through the great High Priest, who offered Himself to God in His passion for us, that we might be members of this glorious head, according to the form of a servant. For it was this form He offered, in this He was offered, because it is according to it He is Mediator, in this He is our Priest, in this the Sacrifice. Accordingly, when the apostle had exhorted us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, our reasonable service, and not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed in the renewing of our mind, that we might prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God, that is to say, the true sacrifice of ourselves ... This is the sacrifice of Christians : *we, being many, are one body in Christ*. And this is also the sacrifice which the Church continually celebrates in the sacrament of the altar, known to the faithful, in which she teaches that she herself is offered in the offering she makes to God »¹⁵.

We should listen again to the teaching of Joseph Ratzinger during the time he was serving as an expert at the Second Vatican Council:

« In fact, in the classical theology of the Church, the Eucharist was clearly understood as follows: not so much as the

¹⁵ AUGUSTINE, *The City of God*, X, VI, translated by Marcus Dods, The Modern Library: New York, 1950, p.310.

encounter of the soul with Christ, but as the *concorporatio cum Christo*, as the union of Christians in the one body of the Lord. In order to become the source of brotherly sentiment, a Eucharistic celebration, it goes without saying, must be acknowledged internally and effected as a sacrament of brotherhood... »¹⁶.

The Eucharist makes brothers of us by incorporating us into the Body of Christ. The Eucharistic celebration is not an individual act of devotion, but rather entry into the mystery of the Body. The Eucharist makes brothers of us. The exchange of peace that was re-instated by the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council clearly demonstrates that the Mass is the sacrament of fraternal union and communion.

« The Eucharist is the act of worship that makes brotherhood sacramentally visible. It has social and ethical consequences. Finally, Christians, entirely active in the realities of the world, bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ at the heart of the Church, a communion of brothers. »¹⁷

Do we really understand that « it is in the Eucharist that we find the strength we need to live as one in the way that the Lord asks of us. The Eucharist reminds us that we need one another in our journey to the Kingdom of God » (General Chapter 2011, p.74)?

¹⁶ Joseph RATZINGER, « Frères dans le Christ », Cerf, 2005, p.86.

¹⁷ Hubert HERBRETEAU, *La fraternité. Entre utopie et réalité*. Les Editions de l'Atelier, 2009, p.147.

IV. BROTHERHOOD WITH WORLD-WIDE DIMENSIONS

Brotherhood and ecumenism

There is a certain tension in the use of the word 'brother' since if we recognize that it is faith in Jesus Christ that constitutes us as brothers one with the other, we acknowledge by this very fact that there are also men and women who do not belong to this brotherhood. Still, God's ambition is to reconcile all things under one lord, one sole head, Christ. We are living a situation of profound discontent because the Kingdom is already here, but not yet completely made manifest. It is our mission to work for the building up of the Kingdom, a Kingdom of brothers. The expression we use to speak of Christians of other confessions is significant. We speak of « separated brothers ». We recognize the brotherhood even if it is imperfect.

Our Christian brotherhood cannot settle for what already exists. There is unfinished business, an incompleteness, that gives rise to suffering and rouses us to work for the coming of a humanity that is fully reconciled. The ecumenical challenge forms part of our priorities. As for the mission *ad extra*, it too is an urgent priority for all Christians. We cannot settle for the situation as it exists. We want brotherhood to extend to each and every human being. And that will happen in Christ.

This should move us to rediscover a missionary spirit which has been somewhat restrained during the post-conciliar years. It is important to respect religious and philosophical differences; however, we cannot settle for a situation wherein we fail to enter into dialogue in order to make progress toward a greater faith by sharing it with others.

The Kingdom of God is the utter realization of a family united and brought together by the Father. The dream of brotherhood is included in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. There is a social dimension to brotherhood the goal of which cannot be achieved if those afflicted by poverty and weakness are left by the roadside.

Christian brotherhood destroys human frontiers, but it creates new ones, of which we must be aware. This was the experience of the first Christian communities within the Roman Empire, an empire marked by a strict hierarchy of social structures. The apostle Paul often insisted on the equality and brotherhood that was to distinguish Christians by virtue of their baptism, «For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus » (Gal 3:27-28). Belonging to Christ does away with social and religious distinctions. Christian brotherhood, that which finds its sources in Christ the Savior, truly transcends the frontiers which society erects.

Welcoming the stranger

Otherness (*l'altérité*) goes to the heart of the fraternal life. Each different, but all united by the faith in God. As Michel de Certeau writes, « non-identity is the mode whereby communion is worked out »¹⁸. God appears like the stranger, the one who comes and disrupts our plans. « Charity...sets the community on the foundation of respected differences, but recognized

¹⁸ Michel de CERTEAU, « L'Étranger ou l'union dans la différence » ; D.D.B., 1991, p.18.

as indispensable to one and all; it fosters a kind of love that never ceases to discover and appreciate the originality of the other or others. Union and differentiation grow together »¹⁹.

It must be acknowledged that the constitution of a community of Brothers also gives rise to a certain exclusion. As Joseph Ratzinger wrote, « Even if Christianity does away with frontiers, it is nonetheless the source of a new frontier; that which separates Christian from non-Christian. (Once baptized) the Christian thereafter is at once the brother of the Christian, and not of the non-Christian »²⁰. But he who would become Pope Benedict XVI recognizes that the ambition of Christ was clearly to gather all humanity into the family of God. So there is a built-in tension in Christian brotherhood between the legitimate need to recognize one another as brothers united in Christ and the need to open this brotherhood to all who do not yet know Christ.

In fact, when one looks at Jesus' life, there are a number of Scripture passages that show how Christ broke down too narrowly conceived frontiers that separated « brothers » and « non-brothers », those « inside » and those « outside ». For example, there is that passage where Jesus is found seated in a house. His brothers and his mother have come to take him away, to snatch him because he had gone in a direction his family did not wish him to take. And he says, « Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother » (Mk 3:35).

Jesus broke away from exclusive barriers. Even if a brother isn't just any one, because this brotherhood depends on

¹⁹ Michel de CERTEAU, *Ibidem*, p.17.

²⁰ Joseph RATZINGER, *op.cit.* ; Cerf, 2005, p.81.

doing the will of God, it remains, nevertheless, that brotherhood is a brotherhood open to all.

St. Augustine would say of the Church that it is an « invisible body », that is to say, that it cannot be fully understood by what one sees or knows of it. It cannot define its own borders. Studying the works of Augustine reveals that he used the terms *intus* and *foris* (inside and outside) without restricting the Church to borders because he understood that the dividing line was quite fluid. His pastoral experience as bishop of Hippo led him to break out of his distinction, « Let us all listen to the answer, and let us all be Israel, both you, members of Christ here present, and those also who are outside—yet not truly outside, because I am thinking of those who are dispersed everywhere throughout all nations yet are everywhere within.... »²¹. The Church no longer has borders. When all is said and done, the Church is only fully Church when there are no longer borders. What are we doing to bear witness to the fact that Christian brotherhood has no borders?

Lay and religious: together as brothers and sisters

As we have seen, brotherhood is the Church in the multiplicity of its vocations. Lay, religious, ordained ministers, men, women, the young and the old : the People of God is rich in its diversity. Fraternity at the Assumption illustrates the participation of each in a harmonious structure. A letter on brotherhood cannot be limited to a discussion of life among religious; it explicitly includes all those who participate in community life whatever their vocation in the Church may be. In a special

²¹ *Commentary on Ps. 147, 28*, St. Augustine, tr. Maria Boulding, o.s.b., *Expositions of the Psalms 121-150*, vol. III/20, New York: New City Press, p. 475.

way this letter on brotherhood concerns lay Assumptionists. First of all, because brotherhood is built up between them and religious. There can be no authentic communities without the full and responsible participation of the lay friends of the Assumption. An Assumptionist community is a sign of the Kingdom and its openness to the world is essential for its witness. Moreover, lay Assumptionists participate in Assumption's mission. The challenge of living as brothers and sisters must be undertaken in all its exigency by each lay member of the Alliance. That lay and religious live as brothers and sisters is indispensable. I would say that our first mission is already to live this fraternity as well as possible day in and day out. This implies a conversion to which the last general chapter invited us... a conversion of hearts allowing us to experience forgiveness and reconciliation. A lay Assumptionist must never stop discovering the joy of forgiveness. Laypeople, perhaps more than religious, are marked by significant differences among them of social status, geographic origin, family status, political persuasion. Diversity is important, even if it can give rise to a certain reluctance to mutually accept one another. The virtue of tolerance is also important, but more important than tolerance is the capacity of accepting one another with our differences so that the Body of Christ may live with the full wealth of its members. Conversion is also essential for religious. The Alliance demands a real fraternity, that is to say, an openness of heart and spirit so as to be able to welcome at the heart of our communities those individuals who have chosen a vocation in the Church different than our own. We are well aware that welcoming laypeople means that religious will have to adapt some of their habits and this is often demanding. But we are also aware that opening our communities is a true and mutual enrichment.

Living as brothers and sisters at the Assumption is a sign of the Kingdom.

V. BROTHERHOOD AND OLD AGE

The Christian life brings to light the interdependence that exists between generations. Young and old are called to live together and this is one way of living brotherhood. This is not always easy because the differences can be considerable and there are often misunderstandings. The common life allows the treasure of religious life to be passed from a senior religious to a newcomer. We all need the presence of senior religious. It is unfortunate that society, for various reasons, marginalizes the eldest among us. It is equally true to say that seniors need the presence of the young that they may not feel excluded from what's happening in the world.

« But if it is justified to use the term 'fraternal' for the bond that unites generations in spite of the fact that the end of life approaches --- while the qualifiers 'paternal,' 'maternal' or 'filial' might seem more appropriate --- it is so because each recognizes the fragility of humanity in the other Conversely, the newer generations are invited to express signs of brotherhood to their predecessors especially when, as their health deteriorates, their fragility calls for assistance and tenderness, often with a modesty that is too great to draw or retain one's attention. Brotherhood is thus manifested in a compact between generations »²².

The cohabitation of older generations with the youngest is a treasure not to be overlooked. The Assumption heritage is passed by word of mouth. It is critical to have witnesses of history who recount their experiences and allow newcomers

²² Catherine CHALIER, « La fraternité, un espoir en clair-obscur », Buchet-Chastel, 2003, p.134.

to understand the decisions and choices of the past. It is only by living shoulder to shoulder that continuity between generations can take place.

Sociologists of religious life speak of the risk of an 'alter-congregation' when the heritage is not passed on between generations due to lack of senior witnesses. This is especially the risk of newer foundations where there are too few founders to continue the mission and where the young are many. I ask the elderly among us to show themselves ready to the end to assume the responsibility of passing on our heritage to the younger generations. The Assumption, which is experiencing new growth, needs seniors to assure the passing of the torch. Even in one's old age, it is possible to contribute to the mission.

Brotherhood is not a question of age. If communities were to be segregated by generation, what a loss that would be to religious life! It is good that Assumptionist communities can benefit from the intermingling of various generations. « Healthy or ill, young or old, we share this apostolic mission with our brothers, each according to his vocation and situation » (*Rule of Life* #19).

The same goes for brothers whose bodies and spirits are affected by illness. Those who are ill are also our brothers. The tradition of pilgrimages at the Assumption clearly demonstrates this desire not to create a multi-tiered Church... one that would move quickly ahead and be made up of the able-bodied and another that would move more slowly and whose ranks would be filled by the ill and the handicapped. Pilgrimages remind us that the Church is a brotherhood where each finds his place no matter what his physical or psychological state may be. The *Rule of Life* rightly

recalls this conviction: « We show particular consideration for our sick and elderly brothers » (#9).

CONCLUSION: BROTHERHOOD IS TWO-PRONGED, CALLING US TO GIVE COMPLETELY OF OURSELVES AND BRINGING US HAPPINESS

Brotherhood and poverty

Religious life is placed under the sign of the vows. Among them is poverty to which I return briefly since I dedicated my last letter entirely to this topic. There is a close relationship between poverty and brotherhood. Poverty is probably the best pathway to brotherhood because it commits us to a life detached from possessions and thus creates relationships characterized by respect and simplicity. Let me refer to a reflection of Leonardo Boff on St. Francis of Assisi that I find instructive,

« Poverty is a way of being by which the individual lets things be what they are; one refuses to dominate them, subjugate them, and make them the objects of the will to power. One refuses to be over them in order to be with them. This demands an immense asceticism of the renunciation of the instinct to power, to the dominion over things, and to the satisfaction of human desires. Poverty is the essential path of Saint Francis, realized in the physical place of the poor. The poorer he was, the freer and more fraternal he felt. »²³

²³ Leonardo BOFF, *A Model for Human Liberation*, Orbis Books, 1982, p.35. <http://www.orbisbooks.com/chapters/1-57075-680-5.pdf>.

Thus it was that a new brotherhood came to birth in the universe, one that allowed the *poverello* to call sun and water his brother and sister. Brotherhood, lived in a spirit of poverty, allows human beings to be in a profound relationship with all of Creation.

The joy of brotherhood

Fraternal life in community is a gift from God. At times it is difficult, but it nourishes the hastening of the Kingdom in us and around us. Pope Francis recently decided to declare a year of the consecrated life which we will soon begin. He speaks liberally of the joy that should be the ordinary state of a religious²⁴. I believe firmly that community life is the source of Gospel joy. It is the fruit of the communion that is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God lets us live as brothers. I pray that this joy may be contagious and that it stir up vocations to Assumptionist life. Community life has its illnesses and the most outstanding is probably that which hinders reconciliation. Our communities must encourage conversation, that is, be places where everyone can express himself freely and calmly. That also means that we must be willing to listen to a brother when he speaks because he is expressing who he truly is. Fraternal life is woven together from many lives and everyone's life story placed under the sign of the Spirit is a story of salvation. We are called to discover all of them....to learn how to speak to one another, to

²⁴ « *Rejoice* ». A letter to consecrated men and women in preparation for the year dedicated to the Consecrated Life, February 2, 2014, CICLSAL. <http://www.cmis-int.org/en/rejoice-a-letter-to-consecrated-men-and-women-in-preparation-for-the-year-dedicated-to-consecrated-life>.

share, to communicate. Is this one of the shortcomings of our communities?

Finally, it is also good to speak of tenderness in community life. Even if we are men, this quality of tenderness should not be missing from our daily lives. « For Pope Francis, the mark of brotherhood is tenderness, a 'Eucharistic tenderness', because 'tenderness does us good'. Brotherhood has 'an enormous power to call people together...' 'Religious brotherhood' continued the Pope 'with all its possible diversity, is an experience of love that goes beyond conflicts' »²⁵.

I hope this letter on brotherhood will rekindle our desire to live as brothers and to be one. Our credibility in the eyes of the world will be filtered through the lens of our firm commitment to the love of our brothers. Assumption has its own charism whereby community life bears witness to a commitment for the Kingdom in the day-to-day living out of our lives.

I conclude by asking the Lord to give us the grace of living in joy and peace.

Fr. Benoît GRIÈRE, A.A.
Superior general

Rome, September 8, 2014
The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

²⁵ Cfr ANTONIO SPARADO, *Wake up the World !* November 29, 2013, conversation of Pope Francis with the superiors general, http://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articoli_download/extra/Wake_up_the_world.pdf, pp 10, 12.

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