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**GROWTH IN FRATERNITY**

There are certain basic elements or components of change that have to work in harmony if there is to be growth in a person or a fraternity. These elements have positive value but many of them are at opposite poles. As Neils Bohr observed, "Opposites are not contradictory, but complementary." They are not antagonistic opposites, like good/bad, right/wrong or true/false. They balance each other, and integrate the person or fraternity, e.g.:

formal/informal  
permanent/variable  
conservative/innovative

traditional/new  
institutional/charismatic  
observant/flexible

disciplined/expressive  
stable/mobile  
organized/spontaneous

Although they are pairs of opposites, they are all positive. Together, they contribute towards life and growth. They are involved in processes of change, but if there is to be a change for the good, they have to work in harmony within both a person and a fraternity.

The harmonization of opposites involves an inescapable tension and constant readjustments to maintain a healthy balance. This kind of tension is healthy. It is essential to life and growth.

As I read the gospels and the life of St Francis, I recognize both Jesus and St Francis as examples of persons who integrated complementary opposites.

Let's consider the first-mentioned elements of each opposite pair and run down the list of them: formal, permanent, conservative, traditional, institutional, observant, disciplined, stable. If we imagine a person who embodies only these qualities and upholds only these values to the exclusion of their opposites, we may probably experience him or her as:

rigid  
impersonal

unimaginative  
stagnant

unprogressive  
narrow

Then, if we consider the second-mentioned elements of each opposite pair and run down the list, informal, variable, innovative, new, charismatic, flexible, expressive, mobile, spontaneous, and if we imagine a person who embodies only these qualities and upholds only these values to the exclusion of their opposites, we may probably experience him or her as:

erratic  
unstable

insecure  
undisciplined

inconsiderate  
exhausting

If, God forbid, we have a community of such like-minded persons, who hold out for only one set of values and for little or none of their opposites, then we would experience the fraternity as either moribund or disintegrating.

Some things that we would experience about the first fraternity can also be said about the second fraternity. A group of people who are exclusively institutional and traditional are also confused and insecure when confronted with innovation. A group of people who are exclusively innovative and unconventional are also inflexible in the face of being structured. The erratic community will exhaust itself because of uncontrolled growth, just as surely as the rigid community will expire because of stagnancy. Whatever is life-threatening about one extreme is also life-threatening about the other extreme, but for different reasons. All those positive values without the balance of their positive opposites end up destructive of healthy growth and life.

In a fraternity, it would be ideal if every member integrated both complementary opposites. More realistically, we are going to live with some who are more on the conservative side, and others who are more innovative. We would like to be spared from extreme ones from either opposite side, although a well-balanced fraternity can support them and grow in the process. We need to have both the conservative and the innovative if we are going to grow in our fraternity. So, if I'm a passive and receptive kind of person, I need to interact with an active and innovative person, accept him or her, listen to him and support him, then I'll grow and so will my community. Likewise, persons who are unstructured need others who are orderly in their community to help them and their fraternity to grow.

Needless to say, none of us is perfectly balanced. None of us is fully mature until the resurrection of our bodies. Jesus, the Risen Lord, is balanced and mature. We are all more or less immature, more or less unbalanced, so we are going to be on one side or the other. We need one another to grow personally and in fraternity. We need a variety of members.

Where we have a predominance of the conservative side, we will end up with a stagnant, frustrated fraternity. Where we have a predominance of the unstructured side we will have splinter groups fragmenting off and the fraternity disintegrating. If we look again at those positive values without their balancing opposites, we will find no element for integration among them.

Either one-sided group is bound to die or disintegrate from its own inner dynamism.

There must always be a healthy tension between positive opposites. This kind of tension is essential to life and growth. There is no life, change, growth or renewal without it. There will always be stress within any fraternity working out these elements, but our common Christian vision and values make that a healthy thing, and make us open to one another. We are enabled to grow as persons and as a fraternity.

“All things go in pairs, by opposites, and [God] has made nothing defective; the one consolidates the excellence of the other” (Ecclesiasticus, *Sir* 42:24).

“This is the way to view all the works of the Most High; they go, in pairs, by opposites” (*Sir* 33:14-15).

Carl Schafer OFM  
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**Regional Assistants are requested to distribute this Monthly Spiritual Message to all local Assistants of our Order in the Regional Fraternity.**