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GROWTH IN FRATERNITY (2)

“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).

We all face the task of integrating persons who embody opposite positive qualities into one fraternity.

They are held together by a vision and values that all need to hold in common. In the case of a Christian community, the common vision is the Christ-vision, Jesus Christ’s view of God, of man and woman, of the world, of life. In the case of a Franciscan fraternity, the Christ-vision is coloured by St Francis’s person and vision and spirituality. This vision will hold us together when it is shared to some extent, the more the better, by both sides, the conservative and the progressive.

Important aspects of our Franciscan vision are:

God: our goal in life is union with God;
Jesus Christ: whom we relate to in himself and in others;
Gospel: our chosen way of life;
St Francis: a living model;
Rule and General Constitutions: studied, loved, and accepted as normative in daily life;
obedience: willingness to be co-ordinated into a fraternity;
love: accept others as they are,
affirm the good in others,
listen to others,
give of oneself.

The values that we need to share are at least the gospel values: the beatitudes and the counsels.

This much agreement on vision and values is necessary if all kinds of people are to combine into a Christian community or a Franciscan fraternity. The members will support one another mutually if they are held together by a faith enriched by love. Not just intellectual faith, but loving faith, committed to sharing the Christian and Franciscan vision and values in practice.

When the faith-vision is lost, where the gospel values are watered down so much that they are no longer vital, or where they have been replaced by merely humanistic values, the positive values of growth lose their centre of integration and balance.

Even when the diverse community members are secured by a common loving faith, there will always be tension between those who embody positive opposite values and attitudes. I don't mean that unhealthy tension where people can't talk to one another, when they are bristly and can't stand the presence of one another. This is tension that has turned unhealthy.

Structure is one of the components of growth. Its positive opposite is spontaneity. Structure is like the branches of a tree through which the life flows to produce the fruit. Structure without life is dead, but life without structure is aimless.

In the past, until the promulgation of the Rule of Paul VI in 1978, the life of the Tertiary was structured, in the sense of regulated. The new Rule places less emphasis on prescribed structures and gives more scope to spontaneity.

But overreaction against structure has revealed excessive independence. Some have come out in an allergy to any type of regulation. "Rule" and "Constitutions" are not everywhere given the attention that they require.

Institution is also a component of growth of a corporate body such as a Franciscan fraternity. It involves the relation of the individual member to the fraternity and the reciprocal relation of the fraternity to the member. Its positive opposite is charism.

Some are ill at ease with everything connoted by the word "institutional". As a reaction against certain features of institutional life, this can be healthy. But when it becomes an overreaction, the components of growth, institution/charism, fight against each other.

The numerous Franciscan institutes of religious and secular life have preserved the charism of St Francis over eight centuries. Let us thank Divine Providence heartily for both the charism and the institute.

"[Jesus Christ] is the good Word of the good Father, and it is he who established the order of all things, reconciling opposites and from them forming a single harmony."

St Athanasius, *Against the Gentiles*, in *The Divine Office* Vol. I, p.399.

"The Christian symbol par excellence for the coincidence of opposites is Jesus Christ himself, the Alpha and the Omega, the crucified and the risen one, divine and human, creator and creature. Faith in him is filled with opposites and contradictions. In him all of life's opposites converge."

Joseph Raischl-Andre Cirino, *The Journey into God*, p.106.

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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.