

**God's fellow workers:
the joys, challenges and opportunities
of the relationships between Institutes of Consecrated Life**

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For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely men? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are equal, and each shall receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.
1 Cor 3, 4-9

1. Rejoice always (1 Thes 5, 16)

A wise tradition of the Church encourages us to begin every important evaluation of our lives and mission from a place of consolation, from joy, and this, I believe, is also the best place from which to begin this brief communication on the ways Institutes of Consecrated Life relate with each other. Early in *Evangelii Gaudium*, though, Pope Francis offers us the salutary reminder that the kind of joy we are talking about here, the joy of the evangelizer, always shines out against the backdrop of grateful memory.

So we could do much worse than to take as our starting-point here this question: what grateful memories do we have of positive and life-giving relationships between other Institutes and our own that continue to bring us lasting, inspiring and energizing joy?

In the hope of encouraging you to find your own answers to this question, let me respond to it from out of my own story and my own experience, and with reference to four key areas of our consecrated living.

a) the charismatic, and hence relational, experience of the Founder

I consider myself very blessed to have as Founder St Daniel Comboni, a missionary for whom friendship, relationships and cooperation with others in the Church were like the air he breathed. Passionate and single-minded as he was about the evangelization of Africa, and with the personal experience of the grave difficulties this great project entailed, he was never in any doubt that this was a work that called for the concerted efforts of everyone in the Church. Indeed, one could almost say that he was led to found his own missionary Institutes only when the urgency of the mission overtook the difficulties and resistances that the call to cooperation provoked.

Yet naturally I do not for a moment think that this openness of Daniel Comboni was exclusive to him. I suspect that if all of us return to our Founders and Foundresses, women and men of the Spirit, we are likely to find in them people who believed in building networks of friendship and cooperation with others. When we study and reflect on our Founders, this is perhaps often an aspect of their graced experience that we overlook, and so we run the risk of missing the challenge that is there still to be discovered in our founding charisms. In what ways for our Founders was their charism a gift of relationship and of cooperation? And in what ways does our fidelity to them urge us to similar relationships and cooperation today?

b) together in formation

I consider myself to have been very fortunate indeed to have studied philosophy and theology as a young man at the Missionary Institute London (MIL), a consortium founded by seven exclusively missionary Congregations, which formed women and men evangelizers over several decades, but which sadly – in view of the changed demographics of missionary vocations - was eventually closed some years ago.

There was something deeply energizing and life-giving to be preparing for mission with colleagues from other missionary families, and the fruits were many for our future mission. We formed friendships and lived fraternity; we widened our horizons; we experienced different approaches to mission born of varied histories; we learned to see how the Spirit works in so many different and beautiful ways; we envisaged mission in terms of communion and cooperation.

I imagine that many of you have, in one way or another, had similar experiences of formation with men and women drawn from other religious Congregations, and I suspect that to revisit and re-savor these experiences can be enlightening and encouraging for the challenges being discussed in this brief reflection. Does the formation we offer the members of our Institutes challenge and prepare them for doing mission together?

c) shared mission

Grateful memory, and hence energizing joy, is thus also generated by re-visiting our experiences of mission and apostolate, where in one way or another we have been drawn into cooperation with other religious.

One experience I treasure as especially precious was my time in Uganda in the 1980s, a time of grave political unrest and real suffering for very many. At the time I was fortunate enough to be editor of LEADERSHIP, a magazine aimed at the formation of lay Christian leaders, and it is moving to recall the network of cooperation and support provided by missionaries of many different Congregations throughout the country and even further afield, which allowed the magazine to be a focus of hope and encouragement for many.

And maybe also here there is a lesson to be noted and learned: are we able to build on experiences such as this, somehow occasioned by crisis, when the crisis has passed and “normality” returns? Often, sadly, it seems to me that we are not. As we shall say below, we need to learn to cherish and develop the gift of relationship, and not let it fade or wither.

Even more widely, I think we can say that often there is a lack of strategic planning among religious Institutes working in the same nation or region, when it would make much more sense for them to plan together and to pool resources for the good of the Church.

d) partners in discernment

It has been my lot over the years often to be involved in the government and animation of my own Institute at local, provincial and general levels, and my own current mission at the USG finds me once again in this field.

It is certainly a great joy to be involved in the kind of shared discernment that this necessarily involves. Put simply, faced as we are with huge challenges of life and mission, there is just no alternative to putting our heads and hearts together, helping each other to glimpse what the Lord is doing in history and to find a way forward in lending him the hand he continues, it seems, to seek. Being involved in this kind of sharing is a special way of discovering the gifts of the Spirit, the wisdom and holiness of fellow religious from other Congregations, and is deeply edifying in the best possible sense of the word.

There is a challenge, though, here too: in my view, we need to be more decisive in following through on the practical consequences of our shared discernment and giving them flesh in projects of common mission.

2. Joy in the Holy Spirit (Rm 14, 17)

When we reflect on this journey from the grateful memory of positive experiences of relationships between different Institutes, to the joy that these relationships engender, we discover that we have been drawn into the very heart of consecrated life: this joy is in the end the work and fruit of the Spirit, who continues to make the gift of religious life to the Church and to the world.

This realization – from grateful memory to joy to a new awareness of the Spirit at work – draws us to make several challenging affirmations, affirmations that can have not a few practical consequences:

- the whole question of building relationships between religious Institutes is not secondary or peripheral, but lies at the heart of what consecrated life is called to be. It is the Spirit who draws us together;

- these relationships are an essential element of the charismatic reality of consecrated life: without them, Institutes will not live their charisms to the full, and will not themselves experience the power and wealth of those charisms. Here, as in other areas of human life, I only fully discover who I am through you, precisely because we are both the same and different;
- it is, of course, desirable that Institutes cooperate in mission, and this makes sense in terms of good use of the resources available in responding to the missionary challenges of the day. Yet this albeit positive approach is not the whole story; something deeper and richer is at stake here. An exclusively utilitarian approach is not enough;
- this essentially charismatic and not merely functional vision burns in the words of Jesus in his prayer at the Last Supper: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me”. Our communion is not just a way of better organizing ourselves to meet the needs; it is our first and most effective witness to the Lord we follow.

As already suggested, this vision of communion is no theory: it has far-reaching consequences. When it is lacking, it can lead our Institutes to forms of parochialism or even unedifying and sterile competition. This vision is vital if we are to weather the inevitable difficulties and complications that arise when we come together in projects of mission; experience shows that without this vision, it will be very difficult to stay the course. It is a vision which, when wholeheartedly embraced, frees us to be generous, imaginative and creative.

Perhaps the heart of what we are trying to say here can be best expressed in the memorable words of Pope Benedict XVI’s homily on Pentecost Sunday 2012:

“Jesus says: ‘When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth’ (Jn 16:13). Here, in speaking of the Holy Spirit, Jesus explains to us what the Church is and how she should live in order to be herself, to be the place of unity and communion in Truth; he tells us that behaving as Christians means no longer being shut into our own “I” but rather being open to all things: it means inwardly welcoming the whole Church within ourselves or, even better, inwardly letting her receive us. Therefore when I speak, think and act as a Christian I do not do so by closing myself into myself, but I always do so in all things and starting with all things: thus the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of unity and of truth, may continue to resonate in our human hearts and minds and spur people to meet and to welcome each other. Precisely because the Spirit acts in this way, he ushers us into the whole truth, which is Jesus, and guides us to look at it more deeply and to understand it. We do not grow in knowledge by locking ourselves into own ego but only in an attitude of profound inner humility do we become capable of listening and sharing in the “we” of the Church”.

3. Collaborators of your joy (2Cor 1, 24)

From grateful memory to joy; from joy to the work of the Spirit; from the work of the Spirit to mission in communion: and what might be the shape of such a mission today and into the future?

We attempt some modest answers:

a) a spirituality of cooperation

From what has been said here so far, it is evident that this vision of communion can only be sustained by a deep well of faith-motivations nourished by the Word, by prayer and contemplation, by love of the Cross and joy in the Resurrection. Communion calls for holiness, for intimacy with the Lord who called us together. Looked at from another angle, we would say that any spirituality of religious life without this element of communion of charisms is seriously incomplete.

b) the patience of the sower

It would be very enlightening to re-read the Lord's parables of the seed and the sower in terms of their implications for the mission-in-communion of consecrated life. We would, for example, be encouraged to believe enough in this mission to be ready to make humble beginnings; we would learn to be patient and to be willing to start over and over again; we would understand better how precious the seed is, and so would cherish the various, even apparently minor, experiences of communion.

This latter point is of especial importance. One can readily understand that in certain cases projects of communion may over the years come to be less relevant or viable, and need to be brought to a conclusion. Yet the matter should never end there: all the positive experiences lived together need to be made the beginning of something different and new, a tradition and heritage that calls us to new concrete forms of communion and cooperation into the future. Experience is too precious to be thrown away.

c) towards renewal together

We are all well aware of the challenges our Institutes face at this time, and the considerable effort and energy poured into initiatives of ongoing formation aimed at renewal. Happily, there are projects of cooperation in this area, but they need to be multiplied, born of the conviction that any real renewal will be renewal together, that we really do need each other for this task.

4. More courageously

We cannot conclude this brief communication without recalling the words of Pope Francis at the beginning of the Year of Consecrated Life, typically challenging religious to live this moment, sometimes characterized by fragility and diminishment, as an opportunity in the Spirit:

“I hope for a growth in communion between the members of different Institutes. Might this Year be an occasion for us to step out more courageously from the confines of our respective Institutes and to work together, at the local and global levels, on projects involving formation, evangelization, and social action? This would make for a more effective prophetic witness. Communion and the encounter between different charisms and vocations can open up a path of hope. No one contributes to the future in isolation, by his or her efforts alone, but by seeing himself or herself as part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance. Such a communion inoculates us from the disease of self-absorption”.