

Communion in Communities Amidst the Netizen World

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Introduction

With the new emphasis of the Second Vatican Council on the mystery of the Church as *communio*, the community dimensions of religious life began to emerge with increasing clarity. In the document on Religious and Human Promotion (1978-80) religious are given particular responsibility in the spirituality of communion: It says: “Experts in communion, religious are therefore called to be an ecclesial community in the Church and in the world, witnesses as architects of the plan of unity which is the crowning point of human history in God’s design” (no. 24). Hence, Religious are mandated not only to witness to ecclesial communion but also they are called to become architects or designers of such a communion. The sense of ecclesial communion mandates the religious to develop a spirituality of communion suitable for the present time.

Communion is an outcome of communication. Qualitative communications builds qualitative relationship. In a world of smart phones and internets there is enormous opportunity to relate with people and be in communion with one another. Unfortunately, the usage of modern devices of communication becomes a serious problem due to its disproportionate and unethical usage. Religious are to a great extent caught up by these gadgets. The unedifying and scandalous use social media and modern net workings resulted in various personal, social, communal and moral issues in religious communities too. Hence in this essay, it is our objective to study the topic; *Communion in Community amidst the Netizen World*. We develop this theme firstly, by analyzing the term communion and the different aspects of communion in community. Then we inquire whether the internet and social media promote or facilitate communion in communities or it distance religious from God, from their brothers/sisters who with they live, and those whom they serve through their ministries. Finally, we propose few suggestions for the proper use of these networking systems as they can be utilized for binding people together in love and for doing good to a number of people within few seconds.

I. Communion in Communities

Communion in communities is a relevant topic to deal with in the present context of the religious life in Kerala. Hence, in the following part we consider the terminological understanding of the term and the different dimensions of community life of the religious.

1.1.The Term Communion

The word communion is derived from the Greek word *koinonia* which generally denotes, “fellowship, association, community, communion, joint participation etc. But theologically speaking the term communion has got a richer meaning. The very basic meaning of *koinonia* is comprehend as the mystery of the personal union of each human being with the divine Trinity and with the rest of the mankind, initiated with the faith, and having begun as a

reality in the Church on earth, is directed towards its eschatological fulfilment in the heavenly Church.¹ Thus communion can be understood as a deeply rooted relationship that has its source in the Triune God and it enables human to enter into a deeper relationship with the other. Thus communion is an inclusive term which indicates one's fellowship with God and the other.

1.2. Community: As the Locus of Communion

All religious consider community as an essential aspect of their life. Common life, in fact belongs to the very definition of religious life. Religious community is not simply a collection of religious in search of personal perfection. Much more deeply, it is a participation in and qualified witness of the Church mystery. It is a living expression and fulfilment of its own particular "communion" of the Holy Trinitarian "*koinonia*", for which God the Father has willed that men and women have to have a share in the life of his Son in and through the Spirit.

Evidently, community may take different forms. It may be large or small, formal or informal, according to the charism and needs of the mission. But religious life would be impossible without communion in community. It is the interior union of the members, their being of one heart and one mind (Acts 4:32) that constitute them into a community. The spirit that animates the members, the peace they enjoy in one another's presence, the unconditional acceptance of one another in the unity of faith and love are some indications that make a real community. A genuine community is a "true family gathered in the name of the Lord" (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 15). It is the Spirit who unites the members in Christ. The presence of the Spirit guides the members to authentic brotherhood/sisterhood in the common sharing of goods, the common hearing of the Word, the joyful celebration of the Eucharist, in mutual help and in common prayer. The requirement of brotherly/sisterly life is born of the fact that, we are members of the same Body of Christ and children of the same Father.

In communities religious share the same traditions, spirituality, apostolic activities, resources and constitutions. Fraternal communion proclaims that persons who love God are able to love and sustain each other, accept one another's gifts and limitations, share joys and sorrows-despite differences in age, race, language, nationality, culture, temperament and ministerial competence. Because the asceticism of community life demands love, forgiveness, patience and mutual self-giving this contributes to growth in holiness.

1.3. Why do Religious Live a Common Life?

We gather in community, not because it is more convenient for ministry; not because it may be more economical; or not even to fulfil our need for friendship and intimacy. We gather in community, with all its joys and sorrows, primarily because we dare witness to our oneness with God and with each other. Another factor that impels us to live in community is that it may become a tangible sign of the common vision of the religious congregation to which we belong as it enables one to support the other in the rigours of the inward journey whose goal is nothing less than a transforming union with Jesus Christ

Community life proclaims the reality that we are the 'guardians' of our brothers/sisters. It manifest that love and peace are possible among those who are not related, who do not choose

¹ Mary Prudence Allen, "Communion in Community" in the Foundations of Religious life, Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, Notredame, Indiana, 2009, p. 113.

each other, who are not necessarily friends. In this light, we commit ourselves to be present to each other both in good times and in bad times, in sickness, and in health, and we willingly accept the burdens of the daily life.

1.4. The Essentials of Community Life

It would be wonderful to live in a community in constant cheerfulness and in a smiling mood and always be ready at the service of others. But that rarely happens in this fragile world. Entering in to a community means that we are ready to walk the same road with others, to pray together, to help when we can and to be helped when we need it, to conform to the common life, food, community services, faithful living of charism, loyalty to the superiors, work for the common good, participation in the ministry of the Church and community and so on. Hence, living in a community is not something that confines, but rather something that builds, ennobles, enlarges, expands, and allows growth and some freedom.

To live in community means to be flexible enough to live with others who are different from us in temperament, in education, in competence. To live in a community means to be willing enough to let others in to our world, into our life. It is in the community we learn from each other. And that is growth and that is enrichment and that is the beauty of togetherness.

1.4.1. Communion with God as the Source of Fraternal Union

A religious community is where the many are called to become one. This truth is very difficult to accept from a human point of view. This is because; our senses always made us to think that we are different and we are separate. Fraternal communion is born of our vital communion with God. Faith and acceptance of the person unite the members more deeply than does the relationship of blood or psychological affinity or friendships.

The Word of God and the Eucharist are the principal sources of our fraternal unity. The Word, listened to with faith, is a source of spiritual life. By prayerfully pondering on the Word of God, our minds, hearts and will-power will be strengthened, purified and enlightened. Such prayerful reception of the Word of God will guide us to the divine mysteries and to the love of God and man and will help us to grow in holiness.

The Holy Eucharist, the sign of unity, source of all blessings and the covenant of everlasting love, nourish and strengthen our spiritual life. The Celebration of the Eucharist is the central act of every religious community. In the Eucharistic celebration, we pray “grant that we, who are nourished by the body and blood of your Son and filled with his Holy Spirit, may become one body, one spirit in Christ”. A deep dimension of the Eucharistic celebration is precisely the fostering of brotherly or sisterly love. It should unify and build up the community. As we come out of every Eucharistic celebration to see and treat everyone as the Body of Christ.

1.5. An Ideal Community is a Misapprehension

The Gospel presents us different models of community life. Among them the apostolic community headed by Jesus form an exemplary example. This is not because that the disciples have been mature, well behaved, balanced holy people who formed an inner circle of friends and disciples. In fact, they are ordinary people who weren't clear about Jesus' message, who occasionally turned their back on Jesus even when he was in great need, and who struggled with their own faith. The apostles' relationship with Jesus as well as their faith grew and matured over time until the experience of Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit

confirmed them. Like the apostles, we too encounter struggles in our relationship with Jesus and with one another. St. Francis de Sales says: “Religious communities are not formed for the purpose of gathering together perfect people, but those who have the courage to aim at perfection.”

1.5.1. All are Frail and Imperfect

Literature on religious life always presents the early Christian community as the model for religious communities. Though in the New Testament there are marvellous examples of brotherly/ sisterly love, we find also there an honest chronicling of the limitations and the sins of the community. Though the first Christians lived so close to the Pentecostal experience, they were far from a perfect life of communion. Among the first Christians there prevailed “factions and dissensions” (1 Cor 1:10); jealousy, quarrelling, strife” (1 Cor 3:3-4); anger, selfishness, slander, gossiping, conceit, disorder, foul talk” (2 Cor 12:20-21). There was also disobedience, harshness, and name-calling; insincerity and envy in proclaiming the Gospel (Phi1:15,17). Among them can be seen people “Holding grudges against others” (Eph 4:31-32); “snapping at each other and tearing each other into pieces” (Gal.5:15) “telling lies” (Eph 4:25-26); “paying back one wrong with another, one angry word with another” (1 Pet :9) “factions at meetings of the community” (1 Cor 11, 17,18); “absence from community meetings” (Heb 10:25), sleeping during sermons (Acts 20:9), long sermons that put people to sleep” (Acts 20:9). All these struggles we mention here is not to feel complacent about ourselves but to recognize that the perfect community does not exist. All of these sins will be among us too.

1.5.2. Community Reveals Our True Self

Living together in communities enables us to realize our true self. It tells to us our own weaknesses and failures. St. Francis de Sales says: You might live in the desert for years, and never know how selfish you are, but two or three days in a community will soon tell you the truth”.

Community is a place where our limitations, our fears and our egoism are revealed to us. We discover our poverty and our weakness, our inability to get on with some people, our mental and emotional disturbances, our frustrations and jealousies, our hatred and our wish to destroy. While we were alone we could believe we loved everyone. Now that we are with others, we realize how closed we are in ourselves. Community life thus brings a painful revelation of our limitations, weaknesses and darkness.

Weakness and failures in ourselves and in others can discourage us and disturb us. They will be less disturbing when we know that they are often the bad side of a good gift. For example, one with a strong administrative gift is prone to take control of things in a bad way, not so good at dealing with persons; a person with a gift to balance things is often indecisive and thus hinders decision.

St. Basil (4th Century) the Father of the Eastern monasticism especially of coenobitic life says: The smaller religious community like the larger congregation of which it forms a part, is a microcosm, a miniature of the broader world, with all the greatness and littleness of that world. It is also regretfully acknowledged that there will be rivalries, jealousies, personality conflicts, moral compromises, power plays, irresponsibility, outbursts of anger and the like, and that few persons will not be implicated, in one way or another in all these things. To expect something would be naïve”. Basil goes on to say that one must be prepared for conflict in community.

Differences in personality, vision, ambition and worse--these are the things to be expected in any community. No one has the right to expect a perfect community, just as no one has a right to expect perfection in any individual being. To accept imperfections but to be prepared to see beyond it--to be open-eyed-is certainly the first requisite for living in constant close contact with others.

All these above mentioned aspects point out to the fact that there is no perfect community here on earth. Even the best of our communities are imperfect communities.

1.5.3 The Spirituality of Community Life

The religious are mandated to become the architects or the designers of the spirituality of communion. How can we build a spirituality of communion where men and women of opposed natures and background gather? First of all it is important to know why we gathered as a community.

As we know it is not for the sake of togetherness or to do get some work done. Since the time of Jesus we see people gathered together as a community and not merely as individuals for the sake of union with Christ and for the spread of his Gospel. Later we see, in faith people dedicate themselves for the cause of Gospel and they accept a way of life that the Church in her wisdom has approved in community to aid them in their struggle; thus to experience heaven on earth. It is to support each other on this wondrous journey; we come together as a community. We gather in order to help each other by our words, our prayers and our presence. And when we become discouraged, like Elijah lying under the broom tree, we take for each other the role of the angel who told Elijah. "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you" (1 Kings 19:7). Our support and understanding of our brothers and sisters in the community become a food for their "forty days and forty nights to the Mount of God" (1 Kings 19:8).

This spiritual journey in religious life means self-emptying. It means taking on the mind of Christ who emptied himself. It means not to cling to anything, holding nothing back. In community as we accompany each other along the way, as we support each other in the rigours of the spiritual journey, we may find we are for each other at times of burdens, at other times burden-bearers and blessings

1.5.4. Witnessing Joyful Communion through Community Celebrations

A community sustains itself not merely through discipline and observance of religious practices. Along with those religious practices, there should be time for joyful get together. A community becomes vibrant as we do something new and, creative. To stay together we need regular, simple, ritual processes. The special celebrations, such as feast days, birthdays, anniversaries, jubilees, community outings are special moments that deepen the joy of communion. In order to lead a life of communion, there should be space in the community for growth, change, and surprises. To live in community means to be willing enough to let the others as they are accepting them as they are. We are called to live together and to learn from each other and that is growth and that is enrichment. The Gospel is the basis of community life. By living in community we proclaim the love of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught us: "Love one another as I have loved you". In an age of social networking community life is truly a prophetic sign, as religious are able to bear striking witness to the Trinitarian mystery of self emptying love.

2. Religious Community Life in the Mobile World

2.1.Social Net Working and Community Life

The use of the mobile and the internet has opened a new face to religious life. Two decades ago, the superior of the community kept an absolute control over the life and activities of the religious. The world of the religious ended within the boundaries of the religious community and the mission area. Probably the rest of the time was spent in prayer and doing community activities. With the arrival of the current communication, this has become a history of the past. A general change in the behaviour of the religious men and women is slowly entering into their life. Let us see a few trends that affect the life of the religious.

- The Social networking system has strongly introduced a new concept that every individual is responsible for his/her own life.
- In the past, nuns lived in unquestionable submission to the authorities; but now the networking system has reduced the role of the superior to the first among the equals.
- Easy accessibility puts religious in direct contact with their family members and friends who to some extent enable the religious to share and to discuss even the minute details about their community life, their difficulties to get along with authorities, and members of the community.
- Their sense of personal freedom and lack of self-restraint lead them to immature inter personal relationships.
- Irresponsible use of social medias leads to the diminishing of personal maturity, discipline of life and religious spirit
- The lack of religious spirit force them to use the internet without knowing when to use the internet, how long to use them, what to watch and when and who to contact etc. This creates unnecessary tensions in community life.
- Social networking can be an additive in a certain area. Dedicating too much time to it, one will lose focus
- Religious being busy with the smart phones, computer and other gadgets forgets about the people who need their care and concern. As a result, modern means of communication creates a barrier between religious and their opportunity of touching people's lives in real situations.
- The social net working can be an additive in a certain area. Dedicating too much time to it, one will lose focus on the daily house chores and in the long run will make some religious as an undisciplined and a lazy being. It also will affect someone's health due to lack of sleep and stress.

2.2.Internet and Inter-Personal Relationships

- For any relationship to work, we need to spend quality time with each other. Using virtual media as a substitute for spending time with each other makes it difficult for us to retain the moments that substantially add on to the relationship. It can also cause a broken relationship because of lack of time spend together. Social net working can lead into a serious problem if not done in moderation.
- The social net working strategically employs ways and means to encourage an addictive indulgence. For example, the use of terminology of ‘like’ seems to quantify one’s likeability. The number of likes if taken as a marker of self-worth can be a highly deceptive scale of self-assessment. As a result, they have started to depend on external validation in order to feel good, thus getting caught in a powerful psychological trap. Frequently and often inadvertently, people end up comparing themselves with others and end up feeling a sense of inadequacy and sadness.
- The issue of digital addiction has become very serious in the way it encroaches on the time that was meant for other activities like personal prayer, meditation, community prayer solitude, sleep, food, community and so on. A relationship cannot be built over a platform who seeks to objectify the subjective aspects of one’s life.

2.3.The Impact of Social Net Working on Community Life

One of our present concerns that religious face in community life is the excessive dependence of the religious on networking systems. The outcome of such dependence results in much confusions. We see members who use the social networking systems excessively and some members abstain from their use. Since internet has opened a new face to religious life and we have to cope up with it prudently without discarding its use. What we needed is to start a practical training for positive use of the mobile and social net-working. it is important that personal maturity and religious spirit will help the religious as to when to use them, how long to use them, what to watch and whom to contact, etc. Modern means of communication creates a barrier between us and the opportunity of touching peoples’ lives.

The example of Jesus is to be followed by the religious. Though Jesus could heal from afar, he preferred to walk to Lazarus tomb, Jairus’ home and Zacchaeus’ house to touch and heal them. Even when he was tired (cf. Lk 4.40) in the evening, he put people before other work, touched everyone and blessed them. He considered people not as interruptions but as opportunities. The focus of our entire ministry is finally people. People need someone who can be seen and touched in the midst of a situation of suffering.

Religious have to keep in mind that “The internet is the best forum for evangelization” but do not forget that Gospel values cannot be effectively communicated through gadgets, but through communities that live them amid gloom and doom, thus keeping in human hearts the hope of a fuller, richer life. Such a community communicates itself.

Conclusion

Modern networking systems and devices are God's gifts given to us to speed up our work and make us more available for service to our brothers and sisters both in the community and outside our community. But the excessive use of them may take away from the people who needed us most. It is good to remember the words of Pope Francis about the use of smart phones while forgetting the need of the one who live along with us.

The Pope says: lift up your eyes from the smart phones and see your brothers and sisters, those who share your journey of faith and those who are longing for the Word of life. He continues: May we never look at the screen of our cell phone, more than the eyes of our brothers and sisters.²

Voltaire the anti-Christian French Philosopher (1694-1778) while speaking about religious life in community sarcastically says: "persons who gathered together without knowing one another, who live together without loving one another, and who die without mourning one another". Voltaire says this out of his contempt for religious life. However, we cannot sideline this statement as we are experiencing the lack of genuine communion in religious communities especially in this digital age.

There is the need to go back to the early spirit of religious community life where we see simple men and women who have their primary goal of God-realization live together as a spiritual family with one heart and one soul not as an institution. Religious have to go back to the sources of their primordial life, their *charism* and their specific spirituality, which alone help us to re-live our life of communion in community. Let us remember an adage "as heap of bricks does not make a house, a collection of words does not make a sentence and a multitude of sounds does not make music. So also a crowd of people staying together does not make a community". To make a community an abode of communion we have to share our live living together. For this we have to enrich others by our loving presence, our dedication of life and through our communication both verbal and non-verbal. If the religious count more on the persons with whom they live than the internet and other gadgets, there prevail a life of communion in communities even in the midst of the netizen world.

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² Pope Francis, St. Peters basilica, Vatican, February 2, 2018 (Credit: max Rossi/Reuters via CNS) See also Philip Vysyanethu "Pallikalum Dayarakalum" In *Monasticism Meeting Modernity* eds. Kuttiyil and Ayyaneth, Pune 2019, p.65.

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