**SPIRITUAL EXERCISES 2025**

**29th General Chapter**

**MYSTICISM OF FRATERNAL COMMUNION**

**INTRODUCTION**

“Reviewing” the different aspects of our Salesian consecrated life from the **mystical** perspective has a basic assumption: that our ***whole*** life, and in it every dimension, has (or at least: *can have)* this character, which is called to fill our hearts with joy and happiness.

But, as we have said many times before, it is not a simple quantitative “plus”: something to be lived with *more or less joy*; even less so, as if it depended on our innate character or temperament (which we cannot ignore, of course). Rather, I would like to stress the fundamental ***qualitative*** element that we find underlying this invitation to live our entire life *mystically*, as an expression of the **“grace of unity”** and which presupposes, undoubtedly, our charismatic identity (i.e.: *vocation*).

**1. COMMUNITY LIFE AND FRATERNAL COMMUNION, A REFLECTION OF TRINITARIAN LOVE**

 Trying to reflect on our community life, it is worthwhile from the outset to clarify a potential misunderstanding. Traditionally, it was classical to distinguish between *consecration* and *mission,* which on some occasions led to separations and inappropriate polarisations*.* We must overcome this dichotomy from within, precisely because *mission* is not to be identified with educational, evangelising or pastoral activities. All of this is a concrete expression of what constitutes the Mission in its deepest essence, arising from the deep needs of our recipients, first and foremost the poorest and most abandoned young people: ***being signs and expressions of God’s prevenient/preventive love***. In this sense the Mission is *all-embracing* and therefore cannot exclude any aspect of our life and action.

 Moreover, we must not forget that such Mission is *Christian*: therefore, it stems from the *very identity of our God*, who is Love because he is *Trinitarian Community*: *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*. From this we can say that there *there is no mission unless of the community*: therefore there is no room for these distinctions or polarisations within the Charism.

 We have seen in the previous reflections that precisely this Trinitarian God who is Love, in whose image we were created and in whose Family, which is the Church (and specifically as consecrated persons) we are called to live, is our fundamental *Model*; and our only goal is  **to become more and more like this Trinitarian God through love**. This is the basis of the *mysticism of community life*, recalling Jesus’ prayer to the Father at the Last Supper: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word;  **that they may all be one**. 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” (Jn 17:20-21).

 Before being a human construction, religious community is a gift of the Spirit. It is the love of God, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, from which religious community takes its origin and is built as a true family gathered together in the Lord‘s name.

It is therefore impossible to understand religious community unless we start from its being a gift from on high, from its being a mystery, from its *being rooted in the very heart of the blessed and sanctifying Trinity,* who wills it as part of the mystery of the Church, for the life of the world.

 (*Fraternal Life in Community, no.* 8)

 In the Constitutions, the first article that speaks of *our fraternal life* establishes this Trinitarian foundation: “To live and work together is for us Salesians a fundamental requirement and a sure way of fulfilling our vocation. This is why we come together in communities, where our love for each other leads us to share all we have in a family spirit, and so create communion between person and person. **The community is a reflection of the mystery of the Trinity**” (C. 49).

This Trinitarian conviction, which comes from our faith, *must occur* as a result of our commitment, including asceticism, which is also indispensable here: “there we find **a response to the deep aspirations of the heart, and we become signs of love and unity for the young**.”

We must not forget the anthropological background that, from faith, makes this possible: “In creating man and woman in his own image and likeness, God created them for communion. God the Creator, who revealed himself as Love, as Trinity, as communion, called them to enter into intimate relationship with himself and into interpersonal communion, in the universal fraternity of all men and women. This is our highest vocation: to enter into communion with God and with our brothers and sisters.” (FLC, 9).

In fraternal community life, what we meditated from day one becomes a reality: before we learn *to love*, *we are and feel loved*.

Christ gives a person two basic certainties: the certainty of **being infinitely loved** and the certainty of **being capable of loving** without limits. Nothing except the Cross of Christ can give in a full and definitive way these two certainties and the freedom they bring. Through them, consecrated persons gradually become free from the need to be at the centre of everything and to possess the other, and from the fear of giving themselves to their brothers and sisters. *They learn rather to love as Christ loved them*,with that love which now is poured forth in their hearts, making them capable of forgetting themselves and giving themselves as the Lord did.

By the power of this love a community is brought to life as a gathering of people who are free, liberated by the Cross of Christ. (FLC, 22).

 The same Church document briefly, but very illuminatingly, presents the mysticism and asceticism of community life:

Communion is a gift offered which also requires a response, a patient learning experience and struggle, in order to overcome the excesses of spontaneity and the fickleness of desires. The highest ideal of community necessarily brings with it conversion from every attitude contrary to communion.

**Community that is not mystical has no soul**, **but community that is not ascetic has no body**. “*Synergy*” between the gift of God and personal commitment is required for building an **incarnated communion**, for giving, in other words, flesh and concrete existence to grace and to the gift of fraternal communion. (*ibidem*).

 If we wanted to express it more simply, it would be as follows:

 **mysticism: communion**

**community life:**

 **asceticism: common life**

 Without a doubt, every religious Family lives fraternal life in its own way, in its own style according to the Charism. For us, there is an expression that manifests this style with an extraordinary human and Christian richness: *the family spirit.*

 “Don Bosco wanted everyone to feel ‘*at home’ in his establishments*. The Salesian house becomes a family when affection is mutual and when all, both confreres and young people, feel welcome and responsible for the common good. In an atmosphere of mutual trust and daily forgiveness, the need and joy of sharing everything is experienced, and relationships are governed not so much by recourse to rules as by faith and the promptings of the heart” (C. 16).

 I would like to highlight the last paragraph, which emphasises the *vocational* dimension of this family spirit: “This is a witness that enkindles in the young the desire to get to know and to follow the Salesian vocation.” Let us also remember what Article 50 says: “God calls us to live in community and entrusts us with brothers to love” (and I would add: and by whom to be loved).

 All this is intimately linked to the attitudes of love, joy and unity which are widely found in the section of the Constitutions on fraternal life. Without a doubt, this mysticism gives meaning to the entire ascetic dimension of life in common: “**The community receives each confrere with an open heart. It accepts him as he is and fosters his growth to maturity.** It offers him the opportunity to use and develop his gifts of nature and of grace. It provides for his needs and sustains him in moments of doubt and difficulty, weariness and ill health.… **The confrere pledges himself to build up the community** in which he lives. He loves it, despite its imperfections, and knows that in it he finds the presence of Christ” (C. 52).

**2. FRATERNAL COMMUNION, THE “THEOLOGICAL SPACE” OF THE EVANGELICAL COUNCILS**

There are many other texts which insist on these fundamental elements. But I think it is necessary to take up and explain a very important issue which was deliberately only mentioned yesterday. **IF** the ultimate foundation of the Evangelical Counsels is the Trinitarian Life of God, the consequence is: neither chastity, nor poverty, nor obedience can be lived on their own: this would inevitably lead to a negative asceticism,, close to a kind of “Christian masochism”. Only from a *community* perspective (without denying the *personal one!*) do they find their fullest meaning, and especially allow their *mystical* nature to develop joyfully.

The Church that we are quoting explicitly touches on this issue, and I would like to suggest at least a few passages. We must note that this document, although it emphasises the *Community aspect of the* Evangelical Counsels, does not refer to its *dimension*, indeed to its Trinitarian **roots.** This will be found, for the first time, two years later in the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*.

Religious profession expresses the gift of self to God and to the Church – a gift, however, which is lived in the community of a religious family. Religious are not only “called*” to an individual personal vocation. Their call is also a* “con-vocation”*, they are called with others, with whom* “they share” *their daily life.*

There is here a convergence of “yeses” to God which unites a number of religious into one single community of life. Consecrated together – united in the same “yes”, united in the Holy Spirit – religious discover every day that their following of Christ “*obedient, poor and chaste*” is lived in fraternity, as was the case with the disciples who followed Jesus in his ministry. They are united with Christ, and therefore called to be united among themselves. They are united in the mission to oppose prophetically the idolatry of power, of possession and of pleasure.

Thus, *obedience* binds together the various wills and unites them in one single fraternal community, endowed with a specific mission to be accomplished within the Church. (…)

*Poverty*: the sharing of goods, even spiritual goods, has been from the beginning *the basis of fraternal communion.* The poverty of individual members, which brings with it a simple and austere life-style, not only frees them from the concerns inherent in private ownership but it also enriches the community, enabling it to serve God and the poor more effectively (…). A community of “*poor*” people is better able to show solidarity with the poor and to point to the very heart of evangelization because it concretely presents the transforming power of the beatitudes.

In the community dimension, consecrated *chastity*, which also implies great purity of mind, heart and body, expresses a great freedom for loving God and all that is his, with an undivided love and thus with a total availability for loving and serving all others, making present the love of Christ. This love, neither selfish nor exclusive, neither possessive nor enslaved to passion, but universal and disinterested, free and freeing, so necessary for mission, is cultivated and grows through fraternal life. (…) (FLC, 44).

And so the document concludes this section: “This *communal* dimension of the vows must be continuously fostered and deepened – a process which is characteristic of permanent formation” (ibidem), – I would add – precisely because it is a relatively new dimension, because it arises from a Trinitarian awareness and conviction of faith.

The Constitutions present this *community* perspective of our charismatic identity, that is, *the family spirit*, and dedicate some articles to stressing it..

With regard to *obedience*, establishing a not always easy relationship with authority, Article 66 says: “In the community, in view of the mission entrusted to us, **we all obey** even though we have different tasks to perform In listening to the Word of God and celebrating the Eucharist, we express and renew our common dedication to the divine will.”

 Later the same article underlines an important and relatively new aspect that derives from the communal nature of obedience: community discernment: “In matters of importance we seek the will of the Lord together in patient brotherly dialogue, with a deep awareness of shared responsibility. The superior exercises his authority by listening to the confreres, encouraging all to make their contribution and promoting a union of wills in faith and charity. He concludes this phase of searching in common by making appropriate decisions. These will normally emerge from a convergence of the views expressed.”

 On this subject, the 2008 Church document, *Service of Authority and Obedience,* presents a very interesting and practical section in no. 20, f. It is not unimportant to remember that this document presents itself in the context of **love** as the most important root of obedience and authority: **Your face I will seek, O Lord**; this must be, after all, Christian (and religious) obedience. If not, it is not authentic.

 Finally, *Vita Consecrata* also emphasises the *community nature* of obedience: “The fraternal life is the privileged place in which to discern and accept God's will, and to walk together with one mind and heart. Obedience, enlivened by charity, unites the members of an Institute in the same witness and the same mission, while respecting the diversity of gifts and individual personalities.” (VC 92).

Regarding *poverty*, there are several articles that allude to the community dimension. In particular, taking the early Christian community as a model, we read: “After the example of the first Christians, we share together our material goods, the fruits of our work, the gifts we receive and whatever comes to us from pensions, subsidies and insurance policies. We do the same with our talents, our energies and our experience. In the community **the good of each individual becomes the good of all.** As brothers we share what we have with the other communities of the province, and we show solidarity with the needs of the entire Congregation, of the Church and of the world.” (C. 76).

 Finally, regarding *chastity*, we find the extraordinary Article 83: “Consecrated chastity, a ‘*sign and stimulus of love’*, frees and enables us to become all things to all people. It develops in us a Christian sense of personal relationships, encourages true friendships, and helps to make the community a family. **In its turn**, the community’s fraternal atmosphere helps us to live our celibacy because of the Kingdom with joy, and sustained by its love and understanding to come safely through difficult times.”

 If we analyse this beautiful article in more detail, we discover a *double movement*, indicated by the expression: “in its turn”: on the one hand, consecrated chastity builds the community and even more, *communion*; and, on the other hand, the community *supports* the chastity of each one, allowing him to live it with *joy and fruitfulness.*

3. CONCLUSION.

I would like to end with two texts, one from the Church and another from the Constitutions, which continue to insist on the **mystical dimension** of community life centred on its **Trinitarian** character, and consequently, as an expression of **love**.

Even *fraternal life*, whereby consecrated persons strive to live in Christ with “one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32), is put forward as an eloquent witness to the Trinity. It proclaims *the Father*,who desires to make all of humanity one family. It proclaims *the incarnate Son,*who gathers the redeemed into unity, pointing the way by his example, his prayer, his words and above all his death, which is the source of reconciliation for a divided and scattered humanity. It proclaims the *Holy Spirit* as the principle of unity in the Church, wherein he ceaselessly raises up spiritual families and fraternal communities*” (VC 21).*

 Finally, in Article 62 we find an extraordinary convergence of decisive elements for our Salesian life, which evokes what VC will say years later about our personal and community experience of the Evangelical Counsels as “spiritual therapy”:

 “The practice of the counsels, lived in the spirit of the beatitudes, makes our proclamation of the gospel more convincing. In a world tempted by atheism and the idolatry of pleasure, possessions and power, our way of life bears witness, especially to the young, that God exists, that his love can fill a life completely, and that the need to love, the urge to possess, and the freedom to control one’s whole existence, find their fullest meaning in Christ the Saviour.”

In fact, when the Rector Major states the first core area of the Chapter theme, he puts it under the title

* “**Animation and care of the true life of each Salesian2”**

and in spelling it out he specifies the content:

* As believers conquered by God we fix our *gaze on the Salesian consecrated life centred in Jesus Christ.*
* Always taking care of our own vocation and that of others,
* Faithful to God, together as a community, in living a common vocation, a fraternity that is authentic, evangelical and attractive.
* Accompanying fully the different stages of our own life and that of the confreres; *taking care of initial and ongoing formation*.
* With the commitment to live evangelical fraternity in our religious communities and in openness to those who suffer experiences of exclusion in the world.

There are five passages that have to do with the question of Community and therefore of ***Fraternal Life: in fraternal communities***, which is in fact one of the causes of people leaving, not only because of individualism but also because of the lack of those elements that make the community the privileged space of growth and fulfilment as human beings and also of evangelical and vocational effectiveness.

As an appendix, but – in my opinion – one that is very important, I leave you with some other considerations for your reading.

***Appendix***

Looking at and examining the internal life of the religious community today is not easy. There are many aspects that need to be focused on and resolved with the criteria of faith, but also in a practicable manner: the service of authority,shared responsibility and participation, interpersonal relationships, the relationship between life-work or religious community-work management, the balance between the community plan and personal charism, the area of privacy, communication between generations. It is not easy to tackle them all because they require different kinds of approaches. On the other hand, ways of handling them maturely involve various individuals so that sometimes “group” reflection processes are indicated rather than advice to individuals. They require attitudes and efforts whereby those who have, know or can do more sometimes make up for the unavoidable limitations of others: it is loving effort that adapts, accompanies, is patient, offers possibilities, waits for the favourable personal moment, provides direction. While human knowledge or approaches are needed, not everything can be solved with a technical solution. The profession of brotherly love is the basis of everything.

Some changes have certainly changed the life of the community and will do so in the future.

First, *the composition*: the number of confreres per community is decreasing and in some cases we are at the limit. Although small in numbers, they belong to several generations, indeed sometimes the presence of rather elderly people is predominant. This, of course, is not a bad thing, especially if it is experienced, in a positive way, as the possibility for greater personalisation and responsibility in the case of the reduced number; as the testimony of a generation that delivers the experience of life lived according to the charism, in the case where mainly older people are present. Certainly, however, this composition requires a new capacity for relationships and particular attitudes.

A second change concerns *the relationship between community and apostolic work.* No longer is there sole responsibility for the work and no longer is there involvement of all members of the religious community in the work; increasingly there are a few or many involved and others who are already retired. There is a feeling of disproportion between religious personnel and the size of the work. The place was built when there were many confreres; then, little by little, the number was reduced and now it is reaching its limits. There is, consequently, abundant interchange between religious who are still active, and lay people with responsibilities in the works.

A third change is the *greater involvement of the community in the dynamics of the Church and a closer relationship with the surroundings, the local area.* Consecrated life is seen not as “retreat”, but as insertion with a contribution and for a mission. Consequently, there is a multiplication of relationships and interchanges with the outside world. There is less time for community and it is less recollected and protected, more affected by the complexities of life, by the stimuli coming from the context.

However, the most important change that has taken place concerns *the shift from insistence on life in common to that of fraternal life in community*. This means greater consideration of the individual in his originality, more space for him to express himself, the search for quality in relationships, active participation in group life.

I think the two terms immediately convey the idea and thus distinguish their different scope. Life in common means doing the same things at the same time (gathering, praying, eating, working, etc.). “all together” was important for common life. Fraternal life in community means paying more attention to the unity of people, fraternity of relationships, mutual help and support, convergence of intentions and shared planning. This corresponds to the cultural temperament and the new awareness of people that demands recognition, appreciation and an active role. It is obvious that when we speak of the *prophecy of working together* we are not thinking of simply “working together”, but of the prophecy of witnessing communion of purpose and sharing the educative and pastoral project.

This stems from a vision of faith: in fact, it finds its profound motivation in the Trinitarian mystery; it originates in the call to follow Christ; it is an expression and sign of the reality of the Church. Our communion is an expression of Trinitarian communion: “*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; Abide in my love*.” (Jn 15:9)And our mission is also a participation in the Trinitarian mission: “*As the Father has sent me, so I send you*” (Jn 20:21).

In addition to the vision of faith, which must always be deepened, the desire to form a true family among adults needs a new way of conceiving and bringing about personal relationships: to find the bases on which to set them, the ways to renew them before they wear out, to make them satisfactory for individuals. Art. 51 of the Constitutions says: “In an atmosphere of brotherly friendship we share our joys and sorrows, and we are partners in our apostolic plans and experiences.”

Therefore, I believe that *two issues to be addressed* are *urgent* in fraternal life: relationships and communication. They are like the big community dynamics that gather others around them which are certainly important, such as shared responsibility, planning, discernment and the like, but which are facilitated and made possible by the former.

**Or another and alternative text**

***The Community: The Prophecy of Communion***

In a society where individualism reigns, in a culture where selfishness prevails, in families where loneliness is increasingly common, it is natural for individuals to seek communication with others. Today, this is facilitated and favoured by the media; one need only think, on the one hand, of the use of the mobile phone and all other fields of communication such as *youtube*, *facebook*, *twitter, instagram, tik-tok*.... But, on the other hand, it is hindered by virtuality. While this facilitates being in contact with so many people, anywhere in the world, at the same time, it does not ensure communion. This is the result of personal bonds, of the real relationship with others that demands acceptance, respect for one's own personality, acceptance of others’ limitations as well as one’s own, commitment to sharing and living together, all elements that are the foundation of any authentic community and family experience.

For religious the *community*  is first and foremost an option that is the fruit of their vocation, in the sense that religious life is inconceivable without communion concretised in common life. For religious, and in a special way for us Salesians, there are basic reasons for this choice: the need for fraternity stems from the fact that we are children of the same Father, members of the Body of Christ; religious life creates an authentic family made up of people who share the same faith and life project; finally, as Salesians we are called to create and live family spirit as Don Bosco wanted it.

As in other areas of religious life, we can also find risks here, such as setting up a style of relationships that are merely functional or hierarchical or falsely democratic. Ours, on the other hand, must be fraternal and friendly relationships, leading us to love each other to the point of sharing everything. Such a criterion shows us that community is well understood and lived when it tends towards communion. Community alone without communion, with all that this entails regarding welcome, appreciation and esteem, mutual help and love, is reduced to a group where people are simply lumped together. But, on the other hand, communion without community is a narcissistic form of living life and, consequently, a contradiction, because it is a sneaky form of individualism.

Today, religious must make a great and shared effort to create religious communities where spiritual depth, human quality and apostolic commitment of each of the members makes life truly good, beautiful and happy. Just as people do not marry to suffer but to be happy, so people do not enter a community to tolerate confreres but to love them and be loved. In other words, without human quality and spirituality there is no fraternity.

In addition, and this seen from the perspective of the mission of religious life, one cannot be a sign of God Love while alone, which in its deepest reality is Trinity, Community of persons who participate and give to each other. So the very mission requires community. Without it there can be activity, management of works, but no mission.

Furthermore, at a time when the presence of the laity in Congregations is becoming more and more predominant, and not only as employees or co-workers, but as people who share responsibility and even as leaders of religious institutions, all the more reason for communities to stand out for their life of communion, so that this spreads outward in circles among the groups of those who share responsibility and co-workers and in those close to the presence and works of religious.

Yet another not unimportant feature of religious life today is to be highlighted: multicultural communities in an increasingly multi-cultural society. The witness of communities made up of people of different ages, origins, languages, cultures, backgrounds and traditions and united by faith, hope and charity is a real treasure, all the more so as the temptation of xenophobia grows ever stronger. The religious community is also a great contribution we offer to this world divided by social injustice, inter-ethnic conflicts, and certain social, cultural and economic models that are destroying solidarity and mortgaging fraternity forever. God is community. God is love. Here is the good news! This is what we are called to offer to make the world a more human place.