

Reflection on Chapter 6: Our Life in Fraternity  
by Jason Salisbury

When I was asked to write this reflection for the chapter on our life in fraternity I was a little worried. When people ask me about what I like the most and what challenges me the most within religious life it has always been the same answer for both questions. The best thing about religious life is the community; but it is, at the same time, one of the things I struggle with the most. As I'm sure we all know, living with other people is not always easy. As I was reflecting on what to write I found myself in the midst of a struggle. However, I think the struggle in and of itself is what makes our fraternal life relevant to the world today. Why do I say this? I think for me what I found to be one of the underlying themes of this chapter was a call to conversion. This call seems to begin within the individual who chooses to enter into a community and it then continues within the community itself. However, it doesn't stop there, but rather, it is also a call that, according to our brother John Corriveau, "launches us out into the world." Our constitutions speak of our fraternal life as a "Gospel leaven" (N. 107.3). What we do and who we are as community is not merely for ourselves, but for the world. It is a life that is inspired by the Gospel message and therefore becomes a witness to it.

It seems to me that our way of life speaks to the world simply because we are in the world. A world created by God as good, but because of sin is broken. I am broken. And I think as I move along my faith journey and as I continue my life in community this becomes more apparent to me. Our constitutions state that, "As brothers given to each other by the Lord and endowed with different gifts, we should accept one another gratefully" (N. 89.1). I have believed for some time now that our greatest gift we have to offer each other in community, to the church and to the world is in fact our own brokenness. It is because of our brokenness that we care and desire to give our lives in service to others. In coming to terms with our own brokenness, limitations and our own desire for love, forgiveness and mercy we are better able to share that which we have received through grace, to those around us. Do we acknowledge and accept our own brokenness?

This chapter begins with and is grounded in the Trinity. Our God is relational and has chosen to enter into relationship with us. God entered into the messiness of the human condition moved by mercy, moved by love. Jesus the Christ lived in order to show us how to love. He suffered and died because of his witness to this love, but it didn't end there. During the Easter Triduum Dianne Bergant reminded us that the proof of the resurrection was not the empty tomb; rather, it was the personal encounters the disciples had of the risen Jesus. In some way we have all experienced our own encounters with this same Jesus. I know that at least for myself, as I'm sure it is for all of us, it is because of this experience of God in our lives that we desire and are drawn into a community way of life. When and how have we experienced God in our lives?

The constitutions remind us that we are to love one another. In doing so we support each other knowing each other's brokenness (N. 89.2). We are encouraged to walk humbly with each other as brothers. To do so takes understanding and respect, but I also think it takes getting to know

one another. Respect and understanding and a willingness to support and love our brothers, from my experience, comes only from knowing my brothers (N. 89.3).

One of the best examples I have of this is from the inter-provincial postulancy program where we spent two months getting to know one another prior to spending the year together in novitiate. We took turns sharing our vocation stories. The sharing was at a level of depth and vulnerability that I haven't really experienced anywhere else. I found that despite our many differences, when we took the time to share our lives with our classmates we found that we really weren't that different after all. We may not have always agreed. We may have had different ideas of how to do things. We may have had different ideas of church and theology. We would get into arguments and we would annoy the hell out of each other. Yet, despite all of that we had a great love and respect for each other and were able to support one another in our common journey (N. 94.4).

It was because of this experience, and others like it, that John Corriveau's talk during the constitutions workshop spoke to me. In talking about the pluriformity of relationships he made the point that pluriformity is not individualism. According to my own notes he gave four points. First, despite the differences, "there is always a common basis." Second, "each of us has a unique way of emptying ourselves in order to give of our selves." Third, "True pluriformity is the remedy for individualism." And finally, "Being drawn into the Trinity we automatically become brothers to one another." This is something I have reflected on quite a bit since the workshops because I think one of the biggest challenges, not just for religious life but for the church and world in general, is a growing sense of individualism. From my own perception this is what was at the heart of our fraternal discussions on how we pray as a province. There is a thought that in order to pray together we must all pray the same. For me, the individualism does not come by way of the different forms of praying. Rather, I think it comes in the attitude that "I have nothing to learn from my brothers and how they pray." This can be applied to a multitude of situations that come with living in community. The difference between pluralism and individualism is not in the difference, but rather, in the attitude "I don't need anyone else," or "I have nothing to learn from you." There is a very fine line between the two. In his address to the European Parliament Pope Francis stated, "Unity does not mean uniformity of political, economic, and cultural life, or ways of thinking. Indeed, all authentic unity draws from the rich diversities which make it up." We all have differing opinions on these matters and, as the province becomes more culturally diverse, are we open to learning new and different ways of doing things?

As a community of brothers journeying together towards our common goal we come from many different backgrounds and walks of life. We each bring something different and new with us into the community. Unity in our fraternal way of life comes not from dismissing or doing away with the differences, but rather from drawing from those differences and learning from one another.

So how, according to our constitutions and our brother John Corriveau, does our fraternal life move us out into the world? Echoing the spirit of the Second Vatican Council our constitutions remind us to always remain aware to the signs of the times. We are able to do this because we remain close to the people. In doing so we walk with them in the midst of a broken world (N. 106.2,3). A world where there is much division, hatred, and violence (N. 107.2). We also live in a very pluralistic society. This is a reality and yet, in the West especially, there is a growing individualism. It is, I think, this individualism and not pluralism that is at the root of division, hatred and violence. Pluriformity leads to an acceptance and transcendence of differences whereas individualism leads to a rejection of the other. Our life in fraternity, if we choose to accept each other for who we are despite our many differences and seek to find common ground together can and will be a great witness to a very divided world.

During our celebration of the Transitus in Chicago one of the brothers in formation gave a reflection on Francis and the leper. He pointed out that many see that as Francis finally seeing and embracing God in the leper. This brother, however, invited us to reflect on this encounter differently by suggesting that not only did he come to see God in the leper, but that he was finally able to see and embrace himself in the leper. With that Francis was shown that he did indeed have something in common even with those he had for so long despised. Again, do we see and embrace our own brokenness? If so, then like Francis we too will be able to see and embrace both God and ourselves in the other. We will be 'launched out into the world'.

In her book, *Clare of Assisi: A Heart Full of Love*, Ilia Delio states, "The foundation of the evangelical life is the human person and the sharing among persons of the experience of Christ. The experience of God in the flesh emphasizes being a 'person in relationship', that is, a brother or sister." I entered the order following my own call to conversion. I came, as we all did, as an individual choosing to live a communal life as brothers. We each come bringing with us different experiences. We are all very different and yet we have all experienced, in some way, an encounter with Christ. Our life in fraternity allows us to share that with one another as brothers and in doing so we give witness to the transforming power of the love and mercy of God in this broken world we live in. It is not easy, as we all know. It is a constant struggle and yet it is "In this way, by supporting one another on our common journey towards holiness, we shall turn our fraternities into homes and schools of communion" (N. 94.4). May our way of life always be an inspired response to the Gospel so that we may always be that Gospel leaven in the world.