

MY TURN

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Opportunities and Difficulties in Living Jesuit

as Friends in the Lord

Preliminary remark: I am going to describe communities which are shaped by my generation, i.e. Jesuits who entered the Society before the Thirty-First General Congregation and were at the end of their formation or still in formation when this congregation took place. The experience of the effects of this congregation has been for most of us a liberating one. What I am going to say is focused on the experience in local communities

Opportunities which help us to live as friends in the Lord

1. More and more communities have discovered how helpful it is to take two to four days once a year exclusively for the community: In an atmosphere of leisure, at another place away from the duties of work, it is much easier to share on a more personal level, to play together, to deal with community issues, even to address conflicts and relationship problems. A group facilitator from outside the community helps the process during those days considerably.

2. Sickness of a member of the community or another serious problem of an individual calls for the attention of the other members and the entire community. If the need is obvious, most Jesuits readily help one another.

3. A similar experience is had when a community is faced with serious attack or questioning from outside. Such a situation stimulates the *we-feeling* and the responsibility for the common good.

4. The celebration of jubilees, birthdays or name days, and other feasts is an opportunity when a community is helped by the situation to overcome the routine and find more explicit expression of its spiritual roots.

5. Good liturgy, especially on certain occasions like those mentioned in No. 4, allows a community to experience that there is a common spiritual background.

6. Certain individuals, especially if they happen to be superiors or ministers in close cooperation, are a real blessing for a community. They influence the climate of a community to a considerable extent.

7. Hospitality: guests both from the Society and from outside help the community to experience its union by their presence, their interest, and their questions.

Difficulties: I found nine major difficulties

1. Most Jesuits of my age are very much identified with their apostolic work. Their energy and concern, their thinking and feeling is focused on the parish, school, faculty, or institute for which they live. The community is seen first of all as the material base which enables the individual Jesuit to do his work. It provides housing, food, laundry, recreation, etc.

2. In consequence of this identification with the apostolic work, most Jesuits of my age are not motivated to give time and energy to community affairs. The ideology is: Since we are an apostolic order, community should not take away time and energy from our apostolic work. It is therefore very difficult to find the necessary time for community meetings.

3. Most Jesuits are the boss in their work. Colleagues and co-workers are mostly dependent on them in one or other way. Over the years the relationship patterns many Jesuits have developed reflect their leadership role. They have gained little experience in peer relationship.

4. When a couple of such leadership personalities are together in an exclusively male group—as happens in our communities—there easily develops a climate of rivalry, most frequently hidden under a teasing and joking communication, sometimes evident in discussions.

5. Most of the time we spend together in community is unstructured communication: at meals, in recreation, even in discussions and in making decisions. Such situations foster the power struggle among the members.

6. Considering group development as described by group dynamics, our communities hardly get beyond the two initial phases of development, i.e.,

the pre-confidence phase and the crisis or power-struggle phase. This means that the norms and style of communication are determined by one or a few strong members of the community. Very often they are those who have been at the place for a long time: the "dominant males" (*Platz-Hirsche*) at the place. The others either have adapted their way of communicating to this style or have given up playing a role in the community.

7. With regard to norms and objectives, there exists a considerable gap between the official orientations for Jesuit life as they are spelled out in the *Constitutions and Complementary Norms* and those in place in many local communities: e.g., with regard to life-style and poverty, to obedience and role of the local superior, to prayer life, to thinking with the Church. This gap does not only de facto exist; usually there is resistance to address it. One is afraid that dealing with the *Constitutions and Complementary Norms* would confront us with our own weakness and deficiencies.

8. Most of our communities have not created an atmosphere in which the individuals can admit their deficiencies. We have not developed forms and rites which could facilitate honest expression of personal failure. Thus one takes refuge to playing down the ideals of our vocation in order to protect oneself. This situation may be less dangerous than a group norm which puts the members under constant pressure to reach high ideals; but it does not promote a corporate identity according to the Ignatian sources.

9. Finally, it must be admitted that certain individuals cause serious problems in communities. Sometimes a member blocks the communication in a community. How can we deal with such a situation without emotionally killing this single member, but also not allowing him to terrorize the whole group?

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