

FROM IDENTITY TO BELONGING

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From the book: FRATERNITÀ IN CAMMINO Verso l'alterità, A. Cencini, Edizione Dehoniane Bologna, 1999, Cap. 3. (trans. notes: a) Prof. Cencini said his talk will be based on the content of Chapter 3 of the book. He will not follow the text as contained in the book, however; so this translation can be only a reference, not a copy of his talk b) in using the third person singular pronoun, I alternated using masculine and feminine.)

Chapter Three

ONGOING FORMATION FOR THE COMMON LIFE

“My dear sons/daughters, you now belong to this religious family, and from now on, everything will be in common among us.”

Thus reads the Rite of Religious Profession. A formula that in its essence and simplicity expresses clearly not only the juridical result of the perpetual profession of vows in the area of relationships or belonging (“now you are part of this religious family”), but also indicates its deep meaning, as a point of departure which is also a point of arrival (“from now on everything will be in common among us.”) Belonging to a congregation, the ritual seems to mean, becomes full and effective only when there is a real communion of life, which embraces all areas of existence; otherwise in that supposed belonging there is something that is not completely true and genuine, if not actually subtly false, like juridical fiction.

In this chapter, we would like to pick up at least some elements about the objective and subjective foundation of a consecrated person's belonging to his/her own religious family, in order then to determine and propose reasons and means that can reinforce and make operational especially the individual and community sense of belonging to the institute.

1. Objective and subject belonging (or belonging and sense of belonging)

Belonging is not primarily a canonical-juridical fact, decided by a formal act like the public and perpetual profession of vows, nor is it the result of a private decision of an individual, but signifies both things, on both the objective and subjective plane. More specifically, it represents the concluding and convergent point of a sort of crossed discernment, on the part of the institute and the person: the former—through the person designated for this task—recognizes the presence of its charism in a precise individual, who,---in turn---discovers in that same charism or in those who live it, the gift he received from God, his ideal/conceived project (or Ego/I). The meeting point of this double discernment is the public request of the individual to become a member of the institution, and the acceptance of this request by the institution.

The objective basis of belonging is therefore given by the charism and its presence in the individual, but for there to be a feeling of belonging, there has to arise in that person a special way of perceiving and then fulfilling his identity within the charism, as though his identity were hidden in the charism. Or, in other words, one must give also a subjective basis to the subsequent decision of belonging to a religious institution. Then and only then does the strategic transfer from belonging (as objective fact) to a sense of belonging (subjective element) happen.

Let us try to see what makes up this decision and passage, which often are only implicit and therefore weak in many consecrated persons, with consequences that are not at all insignificant.

1.1. From identity to belonging

A sense of identity and belonging represent the structural and constitutive elements of the ego, like two polarities within which each person places and finds the specific contents of her physiognomy or character. Each person, in fact, is defined according to what she is and in what she recognizes the self, as well as what belongs to her and what she attributes to herself: and what each person is, is necessarily linked to what she feels a part of .

In the case of a consecrated person, personal identity is defined by the charism. Or really by that way of being, praying, living relationships, giving oneself for others, living the vows, proclaiming the gospel... which is contained in and revealed by the charism: this is his name, that one that God prepared and gave to him, this is the new person who is waiting to be realized. And precisely from this conviction flows also his sense of belonging, which is exactly the reflection, on the relational-social level, of his sense of identity. The stronger this latter is, the stronger will the other be also. Or, the more one recognizes himself in a charism, the more natural and inevitable will be the choice to give himself to it and to the brothers who share this same gift of the Spirit. On the other hand, we could say that each human being must necessarily give herself to something or someone; she cannot do without that. It is she who will decide to whom or to what, but in any case she cannot exempt herself from doing it, to the point that, if she thinks she is “keeping herself for herself,” without being connected to anything or anyone, she de facto becomes dependent on an infinity of things and persons without knowing it.

Deciding to give himself, on the other hand, to what defines him in his identity, the individual makes an intelligent and directed choice, because in that way he enters concretely into a context of life and persons; values and ideals are centered precisely on what is also at the center of his person, and where he can therefore bring to fulfillment the project of his ego.

In any case, therefore, identity without belonging does not exist: that is true also for the person who becomes consecrated. As a matter of fact, it is from identity that belonging is born.

And if the identity of a religious is defined by charism, we can then define belonging as the effective and affective membership in a religious family in whom that charism is concretely expressed, even codified in a rule of life, visible in the existence of other persons, who become for this person brothers or sisters, who have also recognized the plan that God has for them, confirmed by the Church as an authentic reading of the Word, rich with a history and tradition that reveal its vitality.

1.2 From belonging to identity

But all of this (religious family, rule, history, tradition...) is, and must be, seen and felt by the individual religious as something that is a part of her own ego. That history is and narrates also her own history (or pre-history). The religious family is also her own and true family, whose bonds are more tenacious and resistant than those created by flesh and blood; the rule expresses God's plan for the consecrated person and is called “rule of life” precisely because it describes her life in all its aspects. Tradition is not simply a series of customs passed on by the ancient fathers or mothers, but a guarantee of fidelity (on the part of God and those same mothers/fathers) and a clue for deciphering her own mission in the present.

That is why it is necessary that every consecrated person, beginning from early formation on, start studying the charism, engage in study-meditation on it, its story, the lived experience of the founder, the vicissitudes of the institute...with an attitude of religious respect, sincere veneration, deep gratitude. He must understand that, without that history his ego would be an unsolvable enigma. Belonging, in fact, “generates” identity, or at least helps decipher it ever more clearly, recognizing it in a past and still present history, in precise faces, unmistakable gestures, in words

loaded with meaning and characteristic lifestyles.

The sense of belonging then, cannot be something purely sentimental serving a solely psychological objective, to avoid,--for example—loneliness and be comfortable together; nor is it to be confused with that parochial sectarian sensation typical of the weak who come together to protect themselves and feel stronger, and while they gather they exclude others and isolate them. In the same way, the sense of belonging cannot be reduced to something superficial-generic, as though it were the same thing to belong to one institute or another; nor can it be so weak and meaningless as to permit someone, faced with challenges of the common life, to decide to change institutes or even to leave religious life without being greatly troubled...

The sense of belonging to an institute is true when it is the reflection of the sense of belonging to the charism (or of the sense of identity), and becomes credible when it arouses in the heart not only love for the institute in general, or for the charism in abstract, but a sincere affection for the community such as it is, for the persons in the flesh who compose it, with all their limitations and weaknesses, gifts and ailments. To belong to a religious family means to decide to live together with these persons who become brothers and sisters, because, beyond differences and stronger than the limitations, there is a common project conceived by God and entrusted to each one, which precisely by their living together, becomes ever clearer and can be appreciated in all its beauty and richness.

Therefore, as identity does not exist without belonging, thus there can be no sense of belonging if it is not accompanied by a sense of identity and if it does not determine—in turn—a strengthening of the ego, of its precise physiognomy and positiveness. And as belonging is born from identity, the opposite route can also be taken: belonging enables one continually to discover and re-discover her/his identity.

1.3. Inconsistent belonging

At this point, we can ask ourselves what happens when this relationship between identity and belonging is not lived correctly. We see it in a very schematic form, just by way of illustration.

In general we could say that identity without belonging suffocates into narcissism or individualism, the way belonging without identity becomes dependence or flight from one's responsibilities. More specifically, and on the side of belonging, there is the possibility that it be inconsistent, with three consequent phenomena, which are particularly evident today and not so different one from another, as it might seem at first sight: weak belonging, double (or multiple) and compensating-defensive.

1.3.1 Weak belonging

First of all, belonging is inconsistent when even earlier, at the root, the sense of identity is inconsistent. More precisely, this can happen when there is no correspondence (or consistency) between the charismatic content and the sense of the ego, or rather, when the individual actually, beyond theoretical statements and at the level of deep motivation does not recognize her identity in the charism and does not concretely seek her fulfillment in it.

In practice, that results in a poor identification with the institute's charism and a weak belonging to it, with little motivation and even less passion, or a superficial and external belonging, and therefore scarcely meaningful and effective at the existential level. For this reason the individual creates space and hope for her fulfillment elsewhere, or remains formally within the institution, but her heart and interests live outside of it, even though in a way not necessarily very evident, nor in the sense that this is another strong attraction. Everything in such a person's life is flat and weak.

It is the phenomenon that is perhaps especially on the rise, and we brought it out in the preceding chapter, of so-called “un-chained dog” religious, with no precise points of reference, without a vital center, without identity or binding ties; they certainly have a rule, for example, but live as though they didn’t, disobedient precisely because they don’t belong to anything or anyone... Or, there would also be a weak belonging when identification with the charism is ambiguously interpreted in a private way, as though it were possible to be realized according to a charismatic project without sufficiently living the relational-interpersonal dimension, without being involved any too much in the community life, without feeling responsible for the growth of the other and of the entire community, nor feeling the need of the presence and mediation of a sister or brother in community. And so we will have the figure of a religious who correctly fulfills his duty or even reaches toward perfection, but with a very individual style and means, the “holy individualist,” who lives only formal relationships with his brothers and communicates with them at very superficial levels.

1.3.2 Double (or multiple) belonging

Another phenomenon today, not at all rare, is that of a double or multiple belonging. It seems the opposite of the preceding case; in reality this phenomenon also derives from a missing or uncertain identification with the institute’s charism, which leads some religious to seek other reference points gifted with a certain authoritativeness, and which in fact become authoritative for them, placing themselves in the center of their life and attention. It is as though these religious identified themselves around different identifying nuclei, consequently developing many other reference points of belonging and moving toward a situation that in the long run will be insupportable on an intrapsychic level. The major danger will be of a certain dispersion or confusion of identity on the personal level, with analogous effects on the spiritual and apostolic levels.

The thing assumes a special accent or delicacy when it is a matter of a religious who lives a special relationship with so-called “ecclesial movements.” In this regard I find many wise directions in the document on “Fraternal Life in Community”: “the main difficulty in relating to these movements is the identity of the individual consecrated person: if it is solid, the relationship can be fruitful for both. For those religious who seem to live more in and for a particular movement than in and for their religious community, it is good to recall the following statement in *Potissimum institutioni*: ‘An institute... has an internal cohesiveness which it receives from its nature, its end, its spirit, its character, and its traditions. This whole patrimony is the axis around which both the identity and unity of the institute itself and the unity of life of each of its members are maintained. This is a gift of the Spirit to the Church and does not admit any interference or any admixture. A dialogue and sharing within the Church presumes that each institute is well aware of what it is. Candidates for the religious life...place themselves...under the authority of the superiors [of the institute]...they cannot simultaneously be dependent upon someone apart from the institute.... These exigencies remain after the religious profession, so as to avoid appearance of divided loyalties, either on the level of the personal spiritual life of the religious or on the level of their mission.’”

Taking part in a movement will be positive for religious if it reinforces their specific identity.” In other words, once more, the decisive and determining principle will be the linear correlation between identity and belonging.

1.3.3 Compensatory-defensive belonging

However, an imbalance is also possible in the sense opposite to the one described until now. It is the case of someone who lives a compensatory-defensive type relation-

ship towards the institution, or rather of one who leans on it in order to compensate a negative sense of identity or to gratify certain psychological needs (for ex., need for affection, fear of loneliness, flight from certain responsibilities, etc.) In practice that person reacts to an insufficiently positive or stable perception of himself, or even to a sense of inferiority, entering a group and being identified in some way with its public image, with its social and external display, almost camouflaging himself in it and hiding some of his problems behind noble ideals. This person uses the group to defend himself, therefore, from a negative perception of the ego or to compensate and improve that perception; or to avoid the scarecrow of loneliness joined to the fear of an intimacy that is too involving and includes too much responsibility with a person of the other sex (or to satisfy or ignore other possibly inconsistent needs). Usually it is not a conscious process, and the person can also be in good faith; but nonetheless, signs of this ambiguous relationship with the institution can be present in his behavior.

First of all, this type of consecrated persons normally gives more importance to the official and conventional aspect than to the interior and personal aspect. She is more concerned with appearing as a member of the group than being one really and in the depth of her ego; very often she shows a singular attraction for the value of community. She proclaims it as an absolute and basic value of religious life and expects its observance also with a certain rigor; she has little sense of otherness and does not put up with those who in some way “sing outside the chorus.” Sometimes she is also a little rigid and perfectionist, and does not realize that her community utopia, like all utopias, can also become something oppressive and even violent. Strange to say, but often a lot of problems of life together in our communities result from this excessive and artificial sense of belonging.

2. Formation in a sense of belonging

We have in some way seen the foundation of belonging, but also some characteristics of a false sense of belonging. Let us now try to understand how this sense of belonging can grow and become stronger. Basically, the whole evolutionary route of a project of consecration ought to lead precisely to a progressive feeling oneself as belonging to a charism, to the institute that embodies it, to the concrete community of persons who together share it, belonging to faces, names, a history... Ongoing formation is formation in an ever stronger and evident sense of belonging. The opposite of this ongoing and specific formation is existential frustration, frustration especially of the natural need of a human being for belonging to something and someone.

But let us see in positive terms the formation itinerary for belonging.

2.1 Triple journey of communion

The fundamental principle is quickly said: to grow in belonging is possible only if one grows contemporaneously in identification with the institute's charism: or rather, growth in a sense of belonging happens along the constitutive components of the charism, but well beyond a purely individualistic interpretation of them.

If, therefore, the constitutive components of the charism are the mystical, ascetic and apostolic elements, these three elements become also the three-pronged path of maturation in a sense of belonging; but by going through a movement which leads progressively from the I to the we, or which opens more and more from the private and subject perspective to the logic of the sharing in the same journey of holiness.

2.1.1. Mystical experience to be shared

At the beginning of a charism there is always a theophany, and a surprising theophany. God reveals himself, and while showing his divine face unveils also his human face to humanity.

It is not a simple divine self-communication, which the believer can just accept and contemplate, maybe noticing even more the distance that separates her from the Most High; but rather it is an instance of God speaking of himself, in which the person also hears herself being spoken of. Or a self-revelation of the Divine Mystery which reveals and restores the human person to herself, because she/he is part of the Mystery of God and the truth of God is also her/his truth, truth about her life.

And it is precisely this that is the surprising element, not only that God reveals himself, but that in that same moment and in the same revelation, God pronounces my, our name. For this reason the prophet can say: “we are called by your name” (Jer 14:9) And so, our founders and foundresses: praying men and women who in the mystery they contemplated, or in a particular aspect of the divine reality or of the human life of Christ, slowly and unexpectedly discovered themselves, God’s plan for them and for other persons, an identity to assume, a divine image to live in their own history, a resemblance with God to be manifested.

Our religious families exist because there was someone who lived intensely this peculiar experience of the divine, and they are alive to the extent in which others today, by God’s gift, relive the same experience before the same mystery. The consecrated person is born precisely here, when he begins to discover his “I” (ego) within this rapport with God and permits this contemplated mystery to become the source of his identity, the form of his ego. It is the spirituality that shows him his identity and the individual features of his physiognomy.

But not only of his, but also the physiognomy of all his brothers. It is the spirituality that reveals everyone’s identity, and so also allows a glimpse of the source of common belonging, the place where one’s feeling of belonging matures and grows every day, where that meaning continually find profound reasons. On the objective plane, because those who pray thus, according to a strongly charismatic spirit, will discover a radical resemblance with their sisters/brothers, real and stronger than any diversity. On the subjective plane, because it is with them and with each of them that the search for God is advanced. Moreover, the area of the toilsome journey toward the Transcendent is and also becomes the area where one’s sisters/brothers, and where therefore fraternity is born---true fraternity, by the power of the same gift received from on High, the same desire to see the face of the Father, the same labored pilgrimage toward Him.

And so this type of prayer makes you feel ever more—on the one hand—the beauty of living together praying, but also asks---on the other hand---a greater sharing in and of prayer itself. It no longer makes sense, within a logic of belonging, that in our communities each one substantially provides for his private spirituality by himself, that he creates his goal of private perfection, that he thinks he can interpret alone, without fraternal mediation, the gift of the Word, the charism, spiritual goods, signs of the times... The document *Vita fraterna* reminds us of that forcefully. We have already seen it in the preceding chapter, but let us go back to those central passages of n. 32:

“In many places, there is a felt need for more intense communication among religious living together in the same community.... It requires therefore “searching for ways and methods that will make it possible for all to learn to share , simply and fraternally, the gifts of the Spirit so that these may indeed belong to all and be of benefit to all (cf. 1Cor. 12:7).

In fact, belonging or..

“Communion originates precisely in sharing the Spirit’s gifts, a sharing of faith and in faith, where the more we share those things which are central and vital, the more the fraternal bond grows in strength.”

The time has come, we believe, when we are called to take seriously and

understand deeply the idea of community holiness, because this is the holiness that today's world and Church need so desperately. Consecrated life already has very many saints in its glorious history; now there is an ever greater need for holy communities!

2.1.2. Ascetic project as a common norm of life

It is the natural and inevitable expression of the mystical experience.

The intense contemplation of the divine mystery, in which the consecrated person recognizes also her own face and destiny, gives rise to the need to be formed to it, letting herself be actively modeled to it in gestures, words, thoughts and desires. And this is ascetics. For the most part, and with significant example, if mysticism is the free contemplation of what God is and does in us, ascetics is the attempt, discreet and voluntary, to welcome God's action and respond to it, with a response which is first of all thanksgiving, adoration, wonder for what God continues to do, and only afterward, action and demonstration of good will.

What is important to emphasize is that this process of identification of the ego, begun with the mystical experience necessarily continues during the ascetic moment. The mystery of the ego becomes decipherable, in fact, only on condition that it become also an operational and living reality, that it commit itself with concrete choices and be realized according to a particular way of being, or according to that original ascetic program (composed of behaviors and attitudes, sensitivity and aspirations, moral traits and characteristic virtues, from prayer to styles of interpersonal relationships), which make a person immediately recognizable as belonging to an exact institute. In a word, through the ascetic journey there is a stronger statement of that certain collective personality, we pass progressively and also visibly from the I to the we; therefore also the sense of belonging grows, and grows to the extent in which the individual faithfully follows that journey.

But all this actually can happen only if every institute defines precisely, in the Rule and in the Ratio formationis its own ascetic program (something quite other than taken for granted), and, above all, only if the individual religious recognizes authority in these directions, accepting the physiognomy proposed as his own life form and norm, as habitual and central reference point of all his action and attitude, as that to which he owes obedience and from which a common life-style and way of being springs, which makes him ever more a participant of one same spirit and more brother of other brothers whom he did not choose.

All of this strengthens and makes the sense of belonging to the institute more operative; because the fidelity of one person contributes toward making the charism more visible and stimulates all to relive it in themselves, while it impedes that phenomenon, mentioned earlier, of rootless religious without a center, color or warmth, not identifiable nor recognizable as belonging to any religious family.

2.1.3. Apostolic mission with community style

Every religious family is born with a precise apostolic ministry. It is also fruit of enlightenment by the Spirit who knows and understands not only God's secrets, but also those of humanity and the needs of the times, arousing in those whom the Spirit calls the courage to respond in a creative and effective way to those needs.

On the one hand, the corporal or spiritual work of mercy that characterizes every institute is in some way part of the mystical experience, especially because it is always within a specific mystical experience that this service finds its roots and what keeps it youthful, its original inspiration and interpretational key. Disconnected from that theophany that began it, it would become a generic (no-name), perhaps sincere, gesture of kindness, but weak in intensity and transient, des-

tined to be repeated without much creativity.

On the other hand, the same mystical experience necessarily is expressed in an act of love for the neighbor; it would not be genuine and credible without it, and not only as cause that produces an effect, but as love which—by definition— is prolonged and intensified in that effect, the same and only love for God and for sisters/brothers. The apostolic dimension is thus intimately linked to a precise way of being and thinking, praying and living, singular and collective, which normally functions as an evaluation criteria of a two-fold fidelity: that of the institution to the original charismatic inspiration, and that of the individual to his sense of belonging.

It becomes important then to learn to act in mission with a community style. Which means, first of all, the awareness---by the individual---that also when she operates alone, she acts in name of the community. The apostolate is not hers, does not belong to her, it is the community who sends her, it is the fraternity/sisterhood that she represents.

What is more, not only is he/she an envoy of his community, but is one who works thanks to it. If he can do that particular activity there were those who prepared him, gave their time for him, advised him, gave him certain instruments, especially transmitted a certain spirit to him..., and there is still someone who remains home and perhaps substitutes for him, or prepares his meals, or does certain humble household tasks, or prays for him, or supports him with his faithfulness. And so, it is a duty not only that the apostle be deeply grateful, but also that he remain closely united with his community in everything he does, that he not appropriate it to himself and that he try, at all costs to travel together, waiting, if necessary, for those who proceed more slowly, valuing everyone's contribution, sharing as far as possible the toils and joys, uncertainties and intuitions, sure that no matter how much as he gives of himself to the community, he will never balance the account for what he received from it.

So the apostolate nourishes the sense of belonging and is at the same time nourished by it; the community gives witness to fraternity and the charism shines in the richness and complementarity of the gifts of all.

2.2 Double consignment (giving over) and integration

Another direction of growth in the sense of belonging is given by the type of rapport that is established right from the beginning between the individual and the institution. A sense of belonging, we understand, is true when it is two-way or determines a double and mutual "giving over": that of the consecrated person to the institute and that of the institute to the consecrated person. When, in fact, a religious is consecrated through profession of the vows, she entrusts herself to the institute and the institute entrusts itself to her. Profession is like a pact that is upheld not only by the will expressed by the contracting persons, but also by the awareness—by the individual religious---of a gift that was placed in her hands and of a responsibility placed on her shoulders. The religious is accepted, but must in her turn accept; she is treated like a daughter, but will also have to become mother.

From that moment on, the life of the religious family is identified with hers, and she will not be able to think of herself outside of it. With this consignment she placed herself into its hands, so that the community will lead her to God. Putting herself into its hands she entrusts herself to its holiness and its weaknesses; she does not expect her community to be spotless. Suffice it to know that it is her way to holiness and that there and only there will the grace that saves her reach her. Actually, the fact that she could be welcomed in it with all her sin is already a great grace. Only a thoughtless conceited person would not realize this and feel grateful for it.

At the same time one who makes vows accepts the institute's entrusting itself to him and placing itself in his hands in some way. From that moment the holiness of the institute will depend also on him and he will be responsible, concretely, of the growth of every brother. Also from that

moment on he is called to take upon himself the weakness of his brothers; to accept being conditioned by those beside him. He will not forget for even one instant that his brother's weakness is the mysterious way by which God comes to meet him. Only an irresponsible individualist could fail to understand what great grace is enclosed in accepting the burden of a brother!

Belonging to an institute is to celebrate together the communion of saints and sinners. And therefore to seek ever more, as we have already seen, those forms and instruments that can permit everyone to learn progressively to share, in simplicity and fraternity, the gifts of the Spirit (as the Word, sharing of faith and the charism, spiritual and apostolic experiences, community discernment, the community project, etc.), but also to live together the inevitable experience of personal and community limitations (as pardon, fraternal correction, review of life, accepting diversity, etc.). It is possible, as a matter of fact, to build community around the integration not only of good, but also of evil; and precisely in that way, when we share also infirmities and personal poverty, our sense of belonging grows and becomes stronger than anything that might be able to divide us.

When, in fact, we learn to recognize together our frailties and personal limitations before the same divine mercy, at that moment it is as though the evil loses its diabolic disruptive and rending force, and, instead of reproducing itself, it becomes mysteriously transformed, by divine gift, into an experience of grace which flows down as dew upon everyone, in awareness of the same common need for pardon, in courage to respond to evil with good, with the will to build together, with the blessing of meekness, with the freedom of feeling responsible for the other... And is transformed therefore also into a moment and element of cohesiveness, in joy of being together because always newly reconciled, in an ever more intense sense of belonging. As strange as it may seem, a sense of belonging built only or predominantly on the integration-sharing of good could be only partial, not strong and tenacious enough, because it would leave out an important part of life and experience of every single person and of every human living together. We need both types of integration!

Today we live in a world in which a sense of belonging no longer exists, replaced as it is by diffidence and fear, or by a fear of abandoning oneself into the hands of another. No one seems to belong to anyone anymore, or belonging to some is experienced as a refusal or a negation of belonging to others. For that reason, a testimony like this is all the more awaited and precious.

2.2. One passion and belonging

Everything that we have been saying up to now has a precise root and tends toward an equally precise point of arrival. There is a common home in the life of the human being, a great dwelling that welcomes all of us, within which we live and move, which nurtures us and gives us strength, which generates us and makes us similar among ourselves, beyond every difference. It is the pater-nity-maternity of God..

To this we have always belonged, and from this belonging every other belonging of ours derives. Rather, every earthly belonging is real and healthy, deep and lasting, only if it is born and reborn from the consciousness of belonging first of all to God, belonging in the fullest and deepest sense, like a being part of Him, as passion of love and intensity of affection for the Eternal One, as filial intimacy which by its nature can be dissolved and resolved into universal fraternity. We belong to Him and therefore we belong mutually to each other; and the stronger this originating sense of divine belonging is, so much the stronger will be also the human bond.

The religious community is placed in the world as a sign of this radical and universal belonging; the fraternity that is lived within religious life is a small and timid signal of this extraordinary and very consoling truth: we are sons and daughters, and part of God's family, and therefore sisters and brothers among ourselves!

For this reason the sense of belonging is not a secondary topic, it is not a purely psychological question regarding simply that sensation of comfort linked to being together, nor is it reduced to a solely juridical fact, as we already said at the beginning. On the contrary, the sense of belonging is bound even to a fundamental truth of our faith; it flows from it and returns to it, not for the purpose of community

comfort, but a small earthly account of the non-terrestrial origins of the human being, or in simpler words, of the human being's filial identity.

The witness of a strong sense of belonging, in the ultimate analysis, tells the entire world that each person can say of himself:

"I...have received myself. At the beginning of my existence---meaning the "beginning" not only in a temporal sense, but also in essence, as root and reason for it---there is not a decision to be, made by myself. So much the less am I simply, without there being the necessity of any decision to be...but rather at the beginning of my existence there stands an initiative, a Someone, who gave me to myself. In any case I was given, and given as this specific individual."

Or, as Von Balthasar says:

If I take seriously my "being I", then it is clear that I will never be able to reach my origin through my introspection. And now, if we do not want everything to be swallowed up in the abyss of meaningless causality, there is one single possible conclusion: I come from some place, I am given to myself. Not only lent temporarily..., but given. Entrusted to myself. ... In an elementary way, and even superficial still, we "are grateful" to our parents ... But...parents are not the ultimate beginning: they themselves are grateful, in turn, to other parents. They were not able to create my freedom, my independent "being I." Behind them there was at work a much deeper and fundamental beginning, and it is to it that I must be grateful... In this first act only one thing is excluded: that I might consider my existence, for which I am thankful, as an obvious thing, rightful, necessary... Finally: the act that gives me to me did not happen at the beginning to be interrupted later and abandon me to myself. It continues to happen, accompanying me (mitfolgend), in the way that new water spurts from a source and still, always the same water. I come accompanied essentially by my beginning, which carries me in such a way that I can turn to it at any moment. In this "being carried" there is care towards me."

That is what a sense of belonging means. Rather, we could state that the community, beyond its limitations and even contradictions, means exactly the experience of "being accompanied or carried," or, to say it better, to point to, like a figure or a symbol to the fundamental and radical quality of human existence, which is "received existence", gift of a good Will who preferred me to non-existence, absolute gratuity, benevolence completely undeserved, filial identity...

And therefore this life-gift lived together must also become profound gratitude, universal fraternity, openness toward all, cordial welcoming, generous hospitality, proclamation that every person is not only loved by the Eternal One, but designed by God on the palms of his hands. (Is 49:16)

So, the circular outline indicated earlier is confirmed: from identity to belonging, from belonging to identity. While the testimony that truly "everything is in common among us," or the sense of belonging to the community, becomes a proclamation that every human being belongs to God, or that we are all children of the same Father and sisters and brothers among ourselves.

And we belong to each other...

P. Amedeo Cencini, FDCC, cencini@iol.it