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RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

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“Men of Communion”

Men of Communion, this is a phrase we hear regularly, but what does it mean? Literally, to be “in union” – in union with what or better whom? Well, simply put, in union with God and others. This communion can simply be thought of as both vertical and horizontal – both being essential. “This is our highest vocation: to enter into communion with God and with our brothers and sisters” (from a wonderful document from the Congregation for Consecrated Life, “[Fraternal Life in Communion: *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*](#),” 2 February 1994, no. 9). This communion begins in baptism when we were made “sharers in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4), with the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity. This communion is meant to be a living relationship.

Flowing from our communion with God is our communion with the Church – we are to be witnesses to ecclesial communion (cf. [John 17](#) and [Acts 2:42](#)), and in particular, the building of the presbyteral unity begins now. Am I open to my brothers, am I in union with them even if they are different from me? Old, young, liberal, conservative, Latino, Polish, African, fat, skinny, black, white, etc. The presbyterates of our dioceses are a motley crew beginning with ourselves. We have just returned from Holy Week and the beautiful symbolism of the Chrism Mass in which we renew our priestly commitment and concelebrate with our bishop. This is communion. Be open to the other, especially our elders (see chapter 2 of *Reclaiming our Priestly Character*) – priesthood is a bond of most intimate communion. E.g. the priest faculty who span a 50 year differential in birth and priestly formation and ordination, yet we deeply love and respect each other regardless of differences in style (not to mention that we represent seven different national backgrounds – not counting Pensacola!). In fact, we all had a hand in writing this conference!

This bond must be fostered now by actively engaging in communion; in particular with regards to spirituality and common prayer. Such moments in the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours, adoration, and diocesan nights bind us together. Two definitions from the Church of what it means to be men of communion will help us. The first is from St. John Paul II and the second is from the PPF. Pope St. John Paul II wrote:

Of special importance is the capacity to relate to others. This is truly fundamental for a person who is called to be responsible for a community and to be a “man of communion.” This demands that the priest not be arrogant or quarrelsome, but affable, hospitable, sincere in his words and heart, prudent and discreet, generous and ready to serve, capable of opening himself to clear and brotherly relationships and of encouraging the same in others and quick to understand, forgive, and console (*Pastores dabo vobis*, 43).

And the *PPF* reminds us:

A man of communion: a person who has real and deep relational capacities, someone who can enter into genuine dialogue and friendship, a person of true empathy who can understand and know other persons, a person open to others and available to them with a generosity of spirit. The man of communion is capable of making a gift of himself and of receiving the gift of others. This, in fact, requires the full possession of oneself. This life should be one of inner joy and inner peace—signs of self-possession and generosity (*PPF* 76).

The man of communion lives the beautiful litany of First Corinthians 13; desiring always the good of the other through patience and kindness, never delighting in the downfall of the other, but in the building up of the body of Christ. “Thus community becomes ‘Schola Amoris,’ a School of Love” (*Fraternal Life in Communion*, 25). If you can’t love here, how will you do it in the parish? This is the time and place! How often I will hear from someone that the Formation Team is challenging that “we should see him in the parish, because there he is filled with charity, joy and sacrificial love.” My response, “please invite that man to live here – this is your parish!” Men of communion do not compete against each other...except to be first in offering forgiveness. Jealousy and conspiring amongst each other often flows from having listened in our hearts to fears of our own inadequacies. Give each other the benefit of the doubt and presume good intentions. The man of communion also knows how to easily laugh at himself; this is affective maturity according to G.K. Chesterton.

The document “*Fraternal Life in Communion*” offers us a vision of what Christian communion should look like based on scriptural citations – in other words this is not just for religious:

Every day, communities take up again their journey, sustained by the teaching of the Apostles: “love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom. 12:10); “live in harmony with one another” (Rom. 12:16); “welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you” (Rom. 15:7); “I myself am satisfied... that you are... able to instruct one another” (Rom. 15:14); “wait for one another” (1 Cor. 11:33); “through love, be servants of one another” (Gal. 5:13); “encourage one another” (1 Thes. 5:11); “forbearing one another in love” (Eph. 4:2); “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another” (Eph. 4:32); “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21); “pray for one another” (James 5:16); “clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility towards one another” (1 Pet. 5:5); “we have fellowship with one another” (1 Jn. 1:7); “let us not grow weary in well-doing..., especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:9-10). [...] It may be useful to recall that in order to foster communion of minds and hearts among those called to live together in a community, it is necessary to cultivate those qualities which are required in all human relationships: respect, kindness, sincerity, self-control, tactfulness, a sense of humor and a spirit of sharing (*Fraternal Life in Communion*, 26 and 27).

This is how we are to strive to live now and one-day model in our parishes and rectories. For both evangelization and vocations hinge on this witness. Our joy lived in the community of the rectory and the parish is the invitation to others into the love of Christ: “A joyless fraternity is one that is dying out; before long, members will be tempted to seek elsewhere what they can no longer find within their own home. A fraternity rich in joy is a genuine gift from above to brothers and sisters

who know how to ask for it and to accept one another, committing themselves to fraternal life, trusting in the action of the Spirit. Thus the words of the Psalm are made true: ‘Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity’ (Ps. 133:1-3)” (Fraternal Life in Communion, 28).

Communion through communication! Openness to the other, regular gatherings and meetings (e.g. priest of the house, faculty council, diocesan nights, etc. – all important!). Grow in communion as we communicate even in the simplest of ways – every genuine human encounter is a moment of growth in relationship. Living in community means telling the other what you are doing (rectory living!); we are accountable to each other. Dialogue with each other and truly listen in order to understand where your brother is coming from (emotionally, existentially, and ecclesially). No more lone rangers – “I did it my way” is not our theme song (apologies to both Sinatra and Scaramuzzo) – we are to be men of communion with each other. We are responsible to and for each other. Pope John Paul II noted that the ordained ministry has a radical “communitarian form” and can only be carried out as a “collective work” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 17).

We need to understand what a real human relationship is and means. How do we learn to communicate in depth, in complement, and in continuity? What goes into forming lifelong friendships and friendships that open out to others? The meal is the privileged place of such communication and communion. Say no to technology at table! Reaching out to form relationships (not just acquaintances) with all in the community, which means not racing in and out of the dining room or saving places so that you can always sit with your special friends. It also means not doing “Chinese takeout” regularly with the Styrofoam trays from the refectory – this should only be done only on the rarest of occasions; after all, our meals really do not take that long!

Community is also the place of formation – iron sharpening iron or the image of stone washed jeans – our rough edges are meant to be dulled in the crucible of community. This can be demanding and challenging. How do we treat each other and care for each other? By God’s grace, we are an amazing community and so much good happens here on a daily basis, but are we open to the kind of ongoing conversion that Pope Francis has spoken of eloquently and powerfully concerning conversion as “changing the way we think”? This is, I believe, is the foundational action of formation. The ancient sense of the “conversion of manners,” that is taking on the heart and mind of Christ, still can slip from the center of our attention. I encourage us to be more consciously intentional in building on what we are already doing. Our hospitality is great, but to use an example we have used before, do we consciously step back to make sure our guests get a shot at the dining buffet line first? This sense of welcoming and hospitality will one day either make your parish a thriving family focused environment or if ignored it will just be a cold parish serving as a sacramental conveyer belt – Christ wants more! Our goal is to be intentional and conscious in making the link to future ministry as men of communion – Am I thinking and then acting as Christ? Some of our twentieth century favorites did this very well: St. Maximillian Kolbe, Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, and St. John Paul II to name just a few.

In this multicultural community, which all of our parishes will be as well, am I sensitive and open to the other, aware of subtle social patterns that can slip into table conversation or even prejudicial comments or jokes that are derogatory to others? The new *Ratio Fundamentalis* states that we are “called above all to a basic human and spiritual serenity that, by overcoming every form of self-promotion, or emotional dependency, allows [us] to be a man of communion, of mission, and of dialogue” (# 41). We need men of communion, of mission, and of dialogue in the church now more than ever!

Please do not forget the first community from which we came, our families. Be men of communion with those to whom we are related – sometimes this is very easy and sometimes this can be very difficult. Also, be conscious of forming relationships of communion with other families and staying grounded in the reality of how our parishioners live and struggle. My own experience of being in Teams of Our Lady with the five married couples over the past 18 years has deeply enriched my life as a priest. Families such as these, and in fact all of the faithful, need us to form the necessary virtues to be men of communion. This then broadens our hearts to be able to reach out, in the words of Pope Francis, to the “existential peripheries.” I think of our Christmas mission trip to Haiti and what it meant to them and to us who went – what mattered most was the sense of “solidarity and presence” – being “in communion” with them was more important than anything we did.

Thus, I want to review four enemies that can plague us in our lifelong journey to grow in communion with God and others:

1. The first enemy is inadequacy or the fears of being inadequate – this enemy of communion leads us to constantly compare ourselves with others and judge ourselves unworthy and inadequate; impotent for the mission. I can remember arriving in first theology and comparing myself to my classmates and realizing that the men around me were smarter, more athletic, personable, and holier than I was! Ouch! I had to learn to rejoice in the gifts of my brothers and discover my own as well. E.g. “KM, what a great guy ... what about me!?” If we do not surrender these feelings to the Lord, we will be left with disappointment that leads to discouragement that leads to doubt that leads to despair... don't go there!

2. The second enemy is isolation. This happens here in the seminary and it can certainly happen in the parish when we remove ourselves from communion with God and community life. When we forget that we are beloved sons and therefore brothers we lose our sense of belonging to Christ and to those around us. Our escape can become locking ourselves in our rooms and binging on Netflix, pornography, or even online shopping! We have been created in the image and likeness of God who is relational. When we remain in relationship, we are drawn from darkness into His life-giving light.

3. The third enemy of communion is cynicism. Brothers, negativity destroys community – either in the seminary, in the presbyterate, or in the parish. Cynicism breeds disunity and distrust – I do not need to say more, we all know what this looks like. If you struggle with this demon bring it to spiritual direction and formation advising; wrestle with this poison in order to conquer it in Christ. Again, know who you are, and your identity as a beloved son of the Father and as a universal brother changes everything.

4. The fourth and final enemy (at least for tonight) is suspicion. If I live with a “hermeneutic of suspicion” about those around me, I am really going to be miserable; not to mention fearful and paranoid. This can easily happen with our colleagues and superiors. Learn how to trust God in genuine humility and then everything else falls into place, because if I trust in the Father to lead me, then I can then trust in Him working through all situations (cf. [Romans 8:28](#)). Strive to live a “hermeneutic of continuity and communion” with your bishop, the faculty, your brother seminarians, and the priests of our diocese thus avoiding marginalizing others or ourselves.

Remember that communion with God and others is always aimed at service and pastoral charity – our lives are to be about others! I want to conclude with the reality of Holy Communion as the point of integration. Since the Eucharist is the “source and summit” of our relationship with God and the model for the purification of our relationships and those within the parish, as we receive Holy Communion at each Mass may we be reminded that we are to live in deep communion with the Triune God and all those around us.

To be man of communion can be summed up in the idea of being a “man for others” that we hear repeated at every Mass: “this is my Body, which will be given up for you. [...] my Blood [...] poured out for you.” It is at the center of our worship, of our mission. This action and the words of Jesus leads to us communion with Him and with others, and stand as a constant reminder who we are as men of Communion. Pope Benedict XVI reflected on this Christ/Communion dimension:

His entire being is expressed by the word, “pro-existence” – he is there, not for himself but for others. This is not merely a dimension of his existence, but its innermost essence and its entirety. His very being is a “being-for.” If we are able to grasp this, then we have truly come close to the mystery of Jesus, and we have understood what discipleship is” (*Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol. II, 134).