

Recovering Our Bearings:
The Role of the Common Life in the Rebuilding of Priestly Fraternity

Many priests consume themselves in work, but become alone and lose their bearings. It is thus all the more important that the unity of the presbyterate is lived and experienced. Support everything which strengthens priests to encounter and to help each other, to live together from the Word and Spirit of the Lord.¹

For a witness to hope, John Paul II was remarkably sober. He lacked both the euphoric intoxication of the religious enthusiast and the staid self-assurance of the Church bureaucrat. His *Holy Thursday Letters to Priests* reveal that an honest assessment of the state of the priesthood in no way contradicts a hopeful encouragement for its renewal.² Like every pontificate of the last century, his writings were replete with the invitation to restore priestly fraternity.³ As he told the German bishops almost forty years ago, *Stützt alles!* Support everything that encourages authentic priestly fraternity.

In many places, this call of John Paul has been heeded and the work of renewal is underway. But authentic renewal presupposes two things. First, we must soberly acknowledge that priestly culture is in a critical state. Our present situation was not caused by a particular generation, an ecclesiastical structure, and most certainly not by the discipline of celibacy. The crisis is a symptom of the Church passing through one of the greatest cultural revolutions in the history of western civilization. Priests now stand in the midst of it, attempting, like everyone, to find their bearings. Secondly, the crisis of priestly fraternity finds its resolution only in Jesus Christ. Locating ourselves again in him through conformity to his person is the only course of true renewal. As we know from the Gospels, Jesus intentionally called a few men together, forming them into an apostolic band.⁴ This continues to this day, described at Vatican II as an "intimate, sacramental brotherhood."⁵ Priestly fraternity can therefore never be a lifestyle option; it is an apostolic mandate of absolute necessity for a full priestly existence. It is the work of every priest, at every time, to express this ontological relationship as a willed bond, a living reality and witness to the unity of the priesthood of Christ.⁶

¹ "Viele Priester verzehren sich in Arbeit, werden aber einsam und verlieren die Orientierung. Um so wichtiger ist es, daß die Einheit des Presbyteriums gelebt und erfahrbar wird. Stützt alles, was die Priester bestärkt, einander zu begegnen und zu helfen, miteinander aus dem Wort und Geist des Herrn zu leben." JOHN PAUL II, *Ansprache an die Deutsche Bischofskonferenz*, 18 November 1980. Though "verlieren die Orientierung" is best translated "lose the orientation," we follow Carol Bertola's translation "lose their bearings," as it provided the initial inspiration for this article. cf. C. BERTOLA, *I Have Called You Friends: Sacramental, Theological and Existential Aspects of Priestly Fraternity*, Alba House, New York 1989, 23.

² cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Letters to My Brother Priests: Complete Collection of Holy Thursday Letters (1979-2005)*, Midwest Theological Forum, Chicago 2006.

³ cf. PIUS X, Ap. Exhortation, *Haerent Animo*, 4 August 1908; PIUS XI, Enc. Letter, *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii*, 20 December 1935; PIUS XII, Ap. Exhortation, *Menti Nostrae*, 23 September 1950; JOHN XXIII, Enc. Letter, *Sacerdotii Nostri Primordia*, 1 August 1959; PAUL VI, Enc. Letter, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 24 June 1967.

⁴ cf. Mark 3:13

⁵ cf. VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 8; *Lumen Gentium*, n. 28.

⁶ "It is necessary to go beyond the factual ontological situation to reach a friendship which expresses a willed bond and, as such, one nourished with care which goes beyond constancy even to the point of intensity." C. BERTOLA, *I Have Called You Friends: Sacramental, Theological and Existential Aspects of Priestly Fraternity*, Alba House, New York 1989, 43.

Though priestly fraternity finds many expressions, only one carries an allergy in our modern day - the common life. By common life, we mean *the shared life of a priestly household, united spiritually by a common vision and expressed materially in common commitments.*⁷ This idea, almost foreign to our modern minds, often elicits a response of hesitation, uneasiness and even suspicion. And strangely enough, it regularly comes from the most impressive of priests.

This allergy is further aggravated by the suggestion that those desiring the common life should form diocesan priestly associations. Now the objections come strongly to the fore. And though they come in a variety of forms, the main critiques are three: it is *divisive, impractical and unnecessary*. The first, that these associations will create a presbyterate within a presbyterate, is a real possibility. Any specific group can become insular, disconnected and polemical. But the question as to whether these associations are *intrinsically* divisive would require a study of the relationship between charism, vocation and state of life. As for the second concern, if it *were* practical to have the common life in our day, then it would probably exist. But when John Paul II called for a new evangelization of "new ardor, methods and expressions," it is hard to imagine he intended it to be confined to the practical.⁸ As for the larger question of how American pragmatism is hindering the renewal of priestly culture, a whole different conversation could be had.

The last critique - that the common life is unnecessary - is the *raison d'être* for this article. Contrary to this opinion, we maintain the necessity of diocesan associations of priestly common life for the following reason: *the restoration of the common life is an indispensable part of the rebuilding of priestly fraternity, and the most fitting way to accomplish this task is the foundation of an association*. Only with the presence of an authentic common life can the fraternity of a presbyterate fully manifest the reality of the sacramental bond. We will propose this in three points: (1) the common life is a legitimate expression of priestly fraternity, (2) with a necessary role in combating self-reliant individualism, (3) and the most fitting way to re-establish this life is to found an association.

1. The Common Life as a Legitimate Expression of Priestly Fraternity

The most recent magisterial document on priestly formation was the *Ratio Fundamentalis*, published by the Congregation for Clergy in December of 2016.⁹ In paragraph 88, it reiterates the importance of priestly fraternity and offers six concrete ways it can be lived, the last of which is the common life.¹⁰ Quoting Canon Law and the *Directory on the Life and Ministry of Priests*, the document highlights the centrality of common prayer as well as

⁷ Though this definition is our own, it is drawn together by many of the sources in this article. We use the term household to delineate it from the typical form of rectory life. By common vision we mean a rule of life; by common commitments, a regular rhythm of prayer, study, meals and recreation. In a particular way, we are drawing emphasis to the spiritual dimension, or common vision, as it is oftentimes the most neglected.

⁸ "The commemoration of the half millennium of evangelization will gain its full energy if it is a commitment, not to re-evangelize but to a New Evangelization, new in its ardor, methods and expression." JOHN PAUL II, *Opening Address of the Nineteenth General Assembly of CELAM*, 9 March 1983, in *L'Osservatore Romano English Edition* 16/780 (18 April 1983), no. 9.

⁹ cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation: Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, 8 December 2016.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, n. 88.

the support the common life provides for "emotional and spiritual balance." But perhaps more importantly is the following: "Among those ways that can give concrete expression to sacramental fraternity, some in particular should be *encouraged from the time of initial formation*."¹¹ It is highly significant to note that the Church is not only asking for the promotion of priestly fraternity in seminary formation, but specifically desiring an encouragement of the common life.

The theological, historical and canonical foundations of the common life as an expression of diocesan priestly fraternity are essentially undeniable.¹² The problem is that what was the norm became the exception, and now the exception has become non-existent. In our day, it is difficult even to fathom the fact that the normative experience of the majority of priests for the first nineteen centuries of the Church was to live in some kind of common life.¹³ This means that a time where priests live apart from a common life is not only highly irregular, but historically anomalous.

Our present problem is not that the legitimacy of the common life is denied; but that its historical precedent is ignored. In our age of radical individualism, we equate proximity with communion, rectory life with common life. This can tragically lead to a painful experience in community, for it is oftentimes more isolating to live with others than to live alone. The Church has given us a great inheritance in the rich theology of the priestly common life. All that is required now is the courage, vision and creativity to bring it into being. That is, if we truly desire it.

2. The Role of the Common Life in an Ethos of Self-Reliant Individualism

Self-reliance is the enemy of priestly fraternity. It is a deep, interior disposition that renders communion impossible. But in our time, self-reliance is the hallmark of the self-made man. For this reason, we admire superhero priests; men who appear entirely self-sufficient and free of human needs. Despite the statistics of burnout and vocational collapse, this instinct to self-reliance is deep set, affecting clerical culture at the level of ethos. One of the principle aims of the rebuilding of priestly fraternity is to engage this ethos of self-reliance. The common life has a particular role to play in this work, which we will describe in three ways: as a *touchstone* to the apostolic way of life, as a *witness* in its comprehensiveness, and as a *protection* against fraternal strategy.

i. When we meditate on the method of Christ, we see that he in no way formed an army of clerical *übermenschen* to accomplish titanic pastoral feats. Instead, he called a few and shared life with them. This apostolic way of life became the foundation of their future priestly lives, a foundation which still exists in the priesthood today. Of all the expressions

¹¹ Ibid, n. 88.

¹² cf. For a theological study, cf. C. BERTOLA, *I Have Called You Friends* (previously cited). For a historical study, cf. J. BERTRAM, *Vita Communis: The Common Life of the Secular Clergy*, Gracewing, Leominster 2009. For a canonical study, cf. G. COULTER, *Juridical Manifestations of the Presbyterium*, License Thesis, Pontifical University of Santa Croce, Rome 2004.

¹³ As Bertram explains, what was normative was the shared commitments of prayer, study, meals and recreation. As for the shared vision, there were a number of rules of secular clergy, most especially in the ancient and early medieval period. For an example of this, cf. J. BERTRAM, *The Chrodegang Rules: The Rules for the Common Life of the Secular Clergy from the Eighth and Ninth Centuries. Critical Texts with Translations and Commentary*, Routledge, London 2017.

of priestly fraternity, it is the common life that most directly imitates this apostolic way of life. As a lived expression of this foundation, the common life can be called the preeminent form of priestly fraternity. Though all priests are not called to live the common life, all need a touchstone, or reference point, back to this apostolic way of life. Without the existence of this preeminent form, the other forms run the risk of being untethered from their apostolic prototype.

ii. Furthermore, the common life witnesses to the presbyterate by the fact that it is comprehensive. What we envision here far exceeds a few meals and prayers together, as good as they may be. When the common life is truly lived, it is lived comprehensively, like a "family environment."¹⁴ For there is nothing more comprehensive than a family, where all things are shared and the semblance of the private is lost in the depths of relation. Unlike the religious, who live this comprehensive dimension *in fact* through vows, diocesan priests must do so *in spirit*. This requires not merely an obligation to external commitments, but a deep interiorization of the life. The priest must feel the existential need for "salvific disillusionment," one that only true community can provide.¹⁵ He must sense that in the fraternal arena, where he cannot run and cannot hide, "there is no escape from the whole truth."¹⁶ Only with the courage of this interiorization can he receive the gifts of vulnerability, intimacy and accountability. From these qualitatively different relationships, rooted in the comprehensive common life, comes a prophetic witness, recalling to all priests the great help and service of fraternity. As Pope Benedict said, "the common life expresses a help that Christ brings to our existence, calling us, through the presence of the brothers, to a configuration always more profound to his person."¹⁷

iii. Massimo Camisasca once observed that when the ethos of self-reliance imbues priestly fraternity, it easily degenerates into "strategy."¹⁸ When everything is based on myself, "fellowship becomes a strategy in order to ... act more efficaciously."¹⁹ This is a "subtle and dangerous temptation" because it appears as "generosity and commitment."²⁰ The key indicator of a "strategic fraternity" is that it is measured according to my evaluation, becoming a means to my end.²¹ I step in and out of fraternity when I want, when I deem it useful, according to my own measure. It is this fraternal calculus that sometimes makes

¹⁴ CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *Directory on the Life and Ministry of Priests*, 11 February 2013, n. 39.

¹⁵ "There is nothing so salvifically disillusional as living in community." M. FRANCIS, *But I Have Called You Friends*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2006, 56.

¹⁶ "A friend is a 'man for all seasons,' and there is no better way of seeing persons in all their seasonal variation than living in community with them, sharing their ups and downs. Those whom we meet only when both of us feel like it can be enjoyable companions, but we don't have to deal with each other when one or both is in a bad mood. In community there is no escape from the whole truth, and because of this there is the possibility that all our relationships, some deeper than others, will be more truthful." M. CASEY, *Strangers to the City: Reflections on the Beliefs and Values of the Rule of Saint Benedict*, Paraclete Press, Brewster, Massachusetts 2015, 122.

¹⁷ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Priestly Fraternity of the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo*, 12 February 2011.

¹⁸ M. CAMISASCA, *Priestly Fraternities: Living the Sacrament of the Other*, in "Communio" (2002) XXIX, 256.

¹⁹ M. CAMISASCA, *Priestly Fraternities*, 256.

²⁰ M. CAMISASCA, *Priestly Fraternities*, 256.

²¹ Reflecting on this temptation in a liturgical context, Ratzinger writes, "Whoever elevates the community to the level of an end in itself is precisely the one who dissolves its foundations." J. RATZINGER, *Collected Works: Theology of the Liturgy*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2014, 204.

priestly interactions feel like "vague and ultimately arid exhortations to 'charity.'"²² And although this spirit is also possible in the common life, it is more difficult to maintain. The greatest assault on self-reliance happens in the most immeasurable of relationships. Intimacy always requires a loss of measure.

Ultimately, the true work of countering this ethos is not structural, but spiritual. Every priest must seek to posture himself as a humble beggar before God. Self-reliance is a response to fear in a sinful world, and only the grace of Christ Jesus casts out fear. Though growing in reliance on the Lord is a noble work of prayer, Jesus gave us the communion of the Church as the human locus for its unfolding.²³ Only in communion with Christ, expressed in the priestly bond, can the *zeitgeist* of self-reliance be truly exorcised. It is to this purpose that the common life aids, as touchstone, witness and protection.

3. *Laissez-faire* or Associate?

We have demonstrated that the common life is a legitimate form of priestly fraternity. Likewise, we have seen how it has a necessary role in countering self-reliant individualism. Our final consideration is the most difficult - how to make this a lived reality.

There are essentially two ways to pursue the common life - one is standard and the other appears novel. The standard pursuit of the common life we call the *hopeful laissez-faire*: with a strange blend of humble trust and false resignation, a man embraces the fact that "though I desire the common life, there is really nothing I can do ... so I'll hope for the best."

There are several problems with this approach. First and foremost, it is *difficult*. In our present day, it is safe to say that the living preference of the priest is a low factor (if one at all) in the determination of his assignments. Even for good men trying to care for their brother priests, doing so within the present diocesan personnel structures makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible. Secondly, the *laissez-faire* approach is *occasional*. Even to receive the ideal assignment where a solid common life is possible, it will only last for a short period of time. There is no deeper stability for a man, one that will carry him through the entirety of his priesthood. Nowadays, a young priest can hope for an assignment of good fraternity here and there, but not as a deeper mode of his priestly life. Thirdly and most importantly, our present approach is *dissociated*. Several priests, living together, desirous of the common life, does not necessarily entail a shared vision. Just as there are innumerable ways to live out the common life of a family, so too with a household of priests. But unlike the family, adult men steeped in self-reliant individualism, given to infinite demands of pastoral ministry, makes this all the more challenging. In summary, though not impossible to establish a common life with the *laissez-faire* approach, it is highly improbable.

This leaves a second option - the formation of an association of diocesan priests in order to restore the common life. Before making an argument for why this is a fitting response, it is good to recall how strongly this was recommended by the Second Vatican Council.

²² C. BERTOLA, *I Have Called Your Friends*, 43.

²³ "If friendship is the natural outlet for the dynamic of fraternity, priestly fraternity cannot nourish itself solely on an intense life of prayer but must also translate itself into an authentic experience of friendship with all the human virtues that accompany it." C. BERTOLA, *I Have Called Your Friends*, 46.

In order that priests may find mutual assistance in the development of their spiritual and intellectual life, that they may be able to cooperate more effectively in their ministry and be saved from the dangers of loneliness which may arise, it is necessary that some kind of common life or some sharing of common life be encouraged among priests ... One should hold also in high regard and eagerly promote those associations which, having been recognized by competent ecclesiastical authority, encourage priestly holiness in the ministry by the use of an appropriate and duly approved rule of life and by fraternal aid, intending thus to do service to the whole order of priests.²⁴

Additionally, canon law affords priests, like all the faithful, the right to associate.²⁵ If Holy Mother Church is calling for deepened priestly fraternity and encouraging the expression of the common life, has she not likewise given us this canonical form in order to pursue it?

But again, the question arises - why associate? Why be different? Because in order to move beyond the vapid niceties and bourgeois comforts that surround much of our fraternal life, we need to envision a more creative solution. The *laissez-faire* approach to the common life, the spinning of Boethius' wheel of fortune at the end of each assignment, will always lead to a fragmentary common life. It will be difficult, occasional and dissociated in its expressions, and incapable of countering the ethos of self-reliance. Only associations create a new potential for addressing the threefold problems listed above. In response to the difficulty of priestly assignments, an association provides a new canonical criterion to be considered in the assignment process. When taken seriously, as the law requires, a man's desire for the common life carries a new warrant. Additionally, the associated common life is one that creates a long-term stability. Members' commitments to each other are not temporary, but transcend particular assignments in a life-long promise. Lastly, only an association can ensure the shared vision requisite for true comprehensiveness in the common life.

All of this presupposes an absolute, unwavering obedience to the bishop of one's local church. His support, or lack thereof, is not a condition of assent, but indication of God's providence. Here a humble sobriety and a galvanized patience is most necessary, for undertaking reform so intimately wedded to diocesan clerical structures is not for the faint of heart. We must acknowledge that even with the establishment of an association, it is highly unlikely that a man will live his whole priesthood immersed in the common life he desires. But it is something he can spend his life working towards, with the hope that it may be different for the next generation. That may have been the thought of Pius X, who laid out the proposal over a hundred years ago:

The annals of the Church show that at times when priests generally lived in a form of common life, this association produced many good results. Why might not one re-establish in our own day something of the kind, with due attention to differences of country and priestly duties? Might not one justifiably hope, and the Church

²⁴ VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 8.

²⁵ "By means of a private agreement made among themselves, the Christian faithful are free to establish associations to pursue the purposes mentioned in Can. 298, §1, without prejudice to the prescript of Can. 301, §1." CODE OF CANON LAW, Can. 299 §1.

would rejoice at it, that such an institution would yield the same good results as formerly?²⁶

The pastoral waters of the post-Christian world are tempestuous with the waves of ideology. God has placed us priests at the helm, that "at least some may be saved."²⁷ The time has come to *recover our bearings*, to recover an awareness of our position in relation to its surroundings. We cannot look to pastoral ministry to provide these bearings, but only to Christ who re-orient us through our sacramental bond. Though an intrepid few man the helm alone, they do so at great risks. The rest of us do what we can to hold together, all the while remembering that one greater than us is asleep in the stern.²⁸

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²⁶ PIUS X, Ap. Exhortation, *Haerent Animo*, 4 August 1908.

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 9:22

²⁸ cf. Matthew 8:24