

UNIVERSAL FRATERNITY

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"YOU ARE ALL BROTHERS" (Mt 23,8)

1. **FRATERNITY** is at the heart of the Gospel. It is the novelty that Jesus brings in a very stratified society: divisions among slaves and free, wealthy very wealthy and poor very poor, absolute powers and peoples that are dominated by blood and fire, and among righteous and sinners, etc. Jesus is well aware of these ruptures in fraternity and implores his disciples to be different: *"It shall not be so among you (...); whoever wishes to be first must become the servant of others"* (Mt 20:27; see also Mt 23:8-11).
2. The seed of fraternity is at the core of Jesus' evangelising practice: he engaged with tax collectors, the sick and sinners (Mk 2:15-17), he enters into dialogue with Samaritans (Jn 4:1-42), he allows himself to be questioned by a foreign woman (Mt 15:21-28), etc.; in other words, he breaks down the barriers that in his time separated human beings and he engaged with those who were despised and excluded, and generated in them a sense of joy and hope. At the same time, this engagement brought him into increasing conflict with those who wanted to keep in place the walls that separated human beings from one another: scribes, Pharisees and priests of the temple.
3. Through his closeness and compassion towards the outcasts of society of his time, Jesus wanted to make visible the foundation of human brotherhood: we are all sons and daughters of the same heavenly Father who *"makes his sun rise on the good and bad and sends rain on the just and unjust"* (Mt 5:45). In God's heart there is no discrimination whatsoever. We are all loved by Him, whatever our moral situation.
4. St. Paul deeply understood this astounding message of the Gospel preached by Jesus and he would write to the Galatians in such audacious words: *"By faith in Christ Jesus you are all children of God. Those who have been baptised and have consecrated themselves to Christ have put on Christ, so that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Gal 3:26-28). The Christian communities sought to this fraternity, that was surprising for Paul's time. It was for this reason that they were attractive and multiplied throughout the whole Mediterranean basin. They were truly a *"light of the world and salt of the earth"* (Mt 5, 13-14).
5. For us, the sacrament of baptism marks the beginning of a life of fraternity. We receive the seed of fraternal life as a grace of sonship. However, we must cultivate it, otherwise it remains unfruitful. Though we are children of God, but we have **to make ourselves** children of God every day by seeking and doing the will of the Father. Though we are brothers and sisters (through Baptism), but we **must make ourselves** brothers and sisters by drawing near to one another each day, serving one another, forgiving each other up to seventy times seven.

THE RUPTURES OF FRATERNITY

6. To cultivate the culture of filiation, friendship and fraternity is an arduous task in our society that promotes and sustains a counterculture of individualism and competitiveness, selfishness and violence, discrimination and exclusionism, isolationism, and self-sufficiency. We just have to listen to and watch the news on television (and media).
7. As ministers of the Gospel we too can easily become infected with these viruses that circulate in our social and cultural environments and end of being "*salt that loses its taste or a light that is placed under a piece of furniture*" (cfr Mt 5, 13-15). However, what is expected of us by the Lord is exactly the opposite: "*Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and praise your Father in heaven*" (Mt 5:16).
8. The vaccine is to live out our ministry in fraternity, hopefully from the beginning of time of our initial formation in the seminary. It is an apprenticeship that purifies our love from selfishness, from being rigid and from the tendency to use others for our own benefit. It protects us from anguish, from bitterness, from hyperactivity, from psychosomatic illnesses and depressions, that is typical of those who always have to be number one in everything and to be so single-handedly.
9. If we are honest with ourselves, we must recognise that we cannot cope with life alone. We need others, we need companions for friendship, advice, comfort, and correction. There we can understand why Jesus begins his proclamation of the New Kingdom by forming a fraternity: The Twelve Apostles.

WHAT DOES A PRIESTLY FRATERNITY SEEK?

10. To grow together in the following of Jesus Christ. We gather together, like the disciples of Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35), to meet in the friendship of the Risen One, in the review of life, in the sharing of the Word, in prayer and in the breaking of the Bread.
11. To learn to be transparent, to trust others, to let others know about my family, my life, my money, my relationship with men and women, my sorrows, my need to be supported. To learn to love each other and to argue; to accept being different and not for that reason each one goes his own way. To be open to differences, to embrace their existence.
12. Learning to have a sense of belonging. To be with others and of others. It is not enough just to being, it is necessary to belong and to create links. It is about learning to carry (to take responsibility for) the lives of others. Learning to live and share with equals. To get out of the superior-inferior, dominator-dominated, protector-protected categories that are some of authoritarian traits that we all have.

13. This experience takes place in small groups (of 4 to 6 participants) so that everyone feels listened to, welcomed, accepted, and contained. We help each other to be faithful in the ministry entrusted to us and to walk together in the footsteps of Jesus, so that He becomes the centre of our lives, animated by His Spirit.

WHAT IS REQUIRED?

14. A decision to participate and join with others. It requires a decision to be real, to share what is really going on in our lives. It requires letting down our defences and letting ourselves being revealed. It requires confidentiality in all that we hear.
15. It requires that we participate in the monthly fraternity meeting which includes rest, food, worship, review of life, sharing the Gospel and sometimes the celebration of the Eucharist.
16. It requires stability in attendance as it takes time to build up bonds among participants. Accepting the frustrations that goes with all fraternal life: that others do not show up, that one would like to speak and there is no space or opportunity to do so, or that someone talks too much, etc.
17. It requires living with a sense of fraternity beyond the boundaries of the formal meeting, within the possibilities (day to day realities) of each priest. I am referring to such gestures as phone calls or visits to see how the other person is doing, birthdays wishes or greetings on the occasion of ordination anniversaries, being present when a new parish or another important assignment is undertaken, or having a fraternity outing.

CHARLES DE FOUCAULD, THE UNIVERSAL BROTHER

18. Our Priestly Fraternity has as its main inspiration the figure of Blessed Charles de Foucauld. We follow Jesus in the footsteps of this holy missionary. Like him, we would like to be passionate seekers of God and let ourselves be led by the Holy Spirit, wherever he wants to lead us. After his conversion, he became a Trappist monk, then an employee of the Poor Clare nuns and finally a diocesan missionary priest in North Africa. His desire was to imitate as closely as possible Jesus of Nazareth, his Brother and Lord, through a life of prayer, poverty and availability to all those in need.
19. Charles de Foucauld's way of evangelising was universal brotherhood. In a letter to a friend, he replied: *"Do you want to know what I can do for the natives? It is not possible to speak to them directly about our Lord. That would make them flee. We must inspire them with confidence, befriend them, render them small services, give them good advice, befriend them, discreetly exhort them to follow the natural religion, show them that Christians love them"*. This is what he calls THE APOSTOLATE OF FRIENDSHIP. Perhaps some of us have had the experience of this way of evangelising non-believers, agnostics or those who are far from the Church.

20. In this way, our experience of priestly fraternity leaves us better prepared to be builders of fraternal life both within our presbytery and our Christian communities and at the social level. Brother Charles' wayside shrine was always open to all and at all times. In a letter to his cousin Marie de Bondy he says: *"I want to accustom all the inhabitants, Christians, Muslims, Jews, to look upon me as a brother. They are beginning to call my house 'the fraternity' and this is very dear to me"*.
21. It is not surprising then that Pope Francis, who works tirelessly for universal fraternity, points out at the end of his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* that Brother Charles was the main inspiration for this letter: *"I would like to conclude by recalling another person of deep faith who, from his intense experience of God, made a journey of transformation until he felt that he was a brother to everyone. This is Blessed Charles de Foucauld (...) the universal brother"¹*.
22. I believe that the pandemic has given us the opportunity to discover and live universal fraternity through solidarity work. In our parish and in many parishes, we have worked side by side with believers and non-believers. Catholics, Evangelicals and Agnostics, have worked side by side to set up parish canteens and soup kitchens in order to deliver food baskets, toiletries and medicines etc. to the sick, the unemployed and the elderly. Also, they have networked with municipalities, health centres, social organisations, neighbourhood councils, etc.

CONCLUSION

23. We have believed in the words of Jesus: *"You are all brothers"* and we have tried to live it in our small priestly fraternities and to be builders of fraternity in our own environment. We do not want to be closed groups, simply of mutual help, who separate themselves from the others and think they are better than the others, like a priestly elite. We seek fraternal life because we know we are fragile and in need of others and because our world today needs to find ways of fraternity, as Pope Francis says in *Fratelli Tutti*. Our fraternity is always at the service of the Mission.

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¹ Pope Francis, *"Fratelli Tutti"*, n. 286 and 287.