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**Paul in the thick of his ministry.**  
**(5) My parish priest and I**

In this reflection I do not intend to continue the reading of the Second Letter to the Corinthians, but to present an exploration. Every now and then in exegesis and in spiritual reading (*lectio*) we need to stop to reflect generally on a subject.

I wondered what exploration might be suggested by our reading, and having seen how Paul's pages spoke such a lot about relationships, problems, misunderstandings, difficulties, in short how to get on together in the community, I thought of a title that may sound rather provocative: *My parish priest and I*.

Of course this subject includes others: my catechists and I, my young people and I, my fellow workers and I. They are all aspects of the problem of getting on together. While I propose this reflection to you, I shall reflect on my relationships with my fellow workers.

Ideally the meditation on *my parish priest and I* should be accompanied by a parallel one for parish priests, which could be called: *My fellow priests and I*, making use of the liturgical formula ("our bishop and his assistant bishops") which indicates a parity of sacramental status, having the same mission.

Of course the problem with catechists and the young and others is different. But here too we have parity in the sacramental status of baptism and sharing in the same mission.

So we also have theological reasons for engaging in this reflection. I will only offer starting points. How shall we proceed?

First we may inquire of the Second Letter to the Corinthians: What does the letter say to us on this subject?

Then I should like to run through a few problems that arise in working together in the community, problems of temperament, psychology, communion and communication.

### **FROM THE SECOND LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS**

I am struck by how Paul makes a point of mentioning his collaborators and involving them. The Second Letter to the Corinthians is very personal and yet at the beginning the Apostle writes: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the Church of God which is at Corinth" (2 Cor 1:1). Thus he associates Timothy with this very important document in which he speaks of his problems and his inner struggles.

This happens in other places in the letter: "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I" (1: 19). Later we see Paul's concern for his collaborators and what they mean in his relationship with the community: "When I came to Troas to preach the Gospel of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord; but my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there" (2: 12-13).

This affectionate reference (my brother Titus) is echoed in further trusting and affectionate mentions of Titus and other collaborators: "Accordingly we have urged Titus that as he had already made a beginning, he should also complete among you this gracious work" (8:6). And again: "But thanks be to God who puts the same earnest care for you into the heart of Titus. For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord" (8:16-17). Besides Titus there are other collaborators: "With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the Churches for his preaching of the Gospel; and not only that, but he has been appointed by the Churches to travel with us in this gracious work which we are carrying on, for the glory of the Lord" (8: 18-19). It is thought this "brother" is Luke. An unknown brother in verse 22: "And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is

now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you." And Titus again: "As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker in your service; and as for our brethren, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men" (8:23-24).

Thus we clearly see the mutual esteem, help and solidarity between the fellow workers for the Gospel in a delicate and difficult task with all the possible criticisms they might attract.

This is not just typical of the Second Letter to the Corinthians, due to circumstances, but it comes across in many pages of other letters. We need only think, for example, of the final greetings at the end of the Letter to the Romans: "Timothy, my fellow worker greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater my kinsman. I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord" (Rom 16:21-2). "Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, to the Church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Cor 1:1).

We realise that these relationships between fellow workers were very close and caring. They supported one another in turn, praised each other to the people, giving each other courage to make themselves accepted. There are no hints of criticism or lack of esteem or denigration of a fellow worker.

This is a lesson for working together in the Church now, as they did in the primitive Church. The Church's life comes from working together, primarily by priests who support each other in their work among the people. This is the ideal relationship.

## SOME EXAMPLES AND PROBLEMS

Now we must examine the problematic part. Of course we do not intend to allude to particular people, because we know so many that they get mixed up and it is not possible to identify any particular one. So these examples are abstract. They may apply singly in different situations or may be combined.

### Different temperaments

*Problems of temperament*, or rather of temperaments. Here I do not consider temperaments in themselves but in relationship with others, especially one-to-one relationships or relationships between a person and a group, or between one group and another. These mutual relationships between two temperaments may be between husband and wife, or an office manager and his fellow worker on the same level or on another level. The point is that it is a mutual relationship between two people. Briefly, there are three types of mutual relationships of temperaments.

Relationships that are *in tune* between people who understand each other at once, spontaneously. People who get on at once are rare, very rare, and the relationship does not always last. Often a marriage takes place with a feeling or hope that there is this kind of spontaneous bond between the two, that they are made for each other, that they understand one another almost without words, but then experience shows that this is not so. So we should not rely on being in tune in a relationship that seems to have dropped from heaven as a gift, although it may be beautiful and we should be grateful if it happens.

It is right we should ask if it is always good for the Church and the community that there should only be in-tune relationships like this, where there are no tensions. Possibly in the long term this would decrease the (family or Church) community's creativity.

The in-tune relationship, which looks ideal on paper, is rare, it easily breaks down and ultimately it is not the only way for the community to grow.

*Opposite temperaments* who cannot understand each other and are incapable of seeing each other's worth. This can happen. Sometimes temperaments which appear to be in tune, especially in families, find after some time that they are opposite and involved in continual misunderstandings.

It is a real tragedy when two people are linked together but temperamentally incapable of valuing one another and instinctively tempted to blame, hurt and destroy.

In the Church too there can be fellow workers with opposite temperaments.

*Complementary temperaments.* This is the third type of mutual relationship. What does complementary mean? It means one has certain gifts and the other has other gifts. For example, one may be active and the other a dreamer, one may be analytical and the other full of fantasy. But they support each other, they complement one another. Complementarity means something more. They are not just complementary in themselves as separate persons, but they are also two temperaments capable of valuing one another and this is real complementarity. The ability to value one another is the key.

Indeed, a lot will depend on the free will of the persons concerned, even in the temperament factor.

### Valuing one another

At this point I wonder what help we can give each other to learn to value one another. There are many simple ways to help ourselves do this.

- *Firstly we should make it our task to respect other people.* Sometimes I feel like saying: Take a sheet of paper and write down all the positive gifts and values in the other person whom you may be criticizing.

When we set about it calmly it is impossible that we should not find any positive qualities.

After we have made a list of positive qualities we may ask ourselves: How can I value these qualities, how can I promote them. Thus we pass from defensive polemic to an attempt to value the other person. We pass from a passive attitude (defending ourselves, arguing, attacking to defend ourselves) to active behaviour (I can help the other person to value himself or herself better). It is also behaviour that puts us on top: we start by feeling lower, needing to defend ourselves and we end up feeling in a sense above, because we are trying to help the other person. It is an amusing way of reversing the situation because there is no open confrontation. It happens within us but it frees us and places us in a different situation in relation to the other person.

- *Secondly we can give positive feedback.* So what we give back to other people is not their failings and faults but our positive feelings about them.

### Paul and Barnabas

We should still realise that these problems are very difficult, there are no easy solutions, and we often just have to live with them. Even Scripture tell us this. In the Bible there is the well known example of the relationship between Paul and Barnabas, between Paul, Barnabas and Mark. It is a dramatic case in the primitive community showing us how difficult it is to get on together even for saints who are apparently in tune and complementary.

We may recall the case of Paul and Barnabas and its two or three phases.

**First phase: the moment when they are in tune:** "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2); "The pro-consul Sergius Paulus summoned Barnabas and Paul and sought to hear the word of God" (Acts 13:7). Here we see they have a vocation in common and in this vocation they willingly set out together. Barnabas is in charge, not Paul. Their understanding and collaboration is obvious but very soon trouble arises, which is soon seen to be serious. The trouble is Mark.

**The second phase passes from agreement to opposition.** "Now Paul and his company set sail from Paphos, and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem; but they passed on from Perga and came to Antioch of Pisidia" (Acts 13:13-14).

It sounds as if nothing has happened but then a few chapters later we realize that this not insignificant event has marked the relationship between the two.

Now the opposition caused by John Mark's departure explodes. "And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Come, let us return and visit the brethren in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.' And Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone

with them to work. And there arose a sharp contention, so that they separated from each other; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed being commended by the brethren to the grace of the Lord" (Acts 15:36-40). It is interesting that Barnabas should go to Cyprus where he and Paul had experienced a peak in close collaboration before Mark's departure, whereas Paul continues on his mission.

This episode from Paul's life causes us to reflect. It shows how even with the best of will and intentions in the world we cannot avoid all disagreements; it is impossible to prevent them. The dispute between them was fierce and the discussion violent. Who was right? Perhaps Barnabas.

**Phase Three.** This comes in the Second Letter to Timothy. Paul writes: "Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you; for he is very useful in serving me" (4: 11). So Mark who was dismissed as useless has become useful. Time has healed their division.

My interpretation is valid even in the opinion of those who hold that the Second Letter to Timothy was not directly written by Paul, but perhaps contains fragments of his letters. The important thing is that the Christian community felt the need to bring this sad story to an end and reunite Paul with Mark.

If on the one hand we cannot avoid all misunderstandings, on the other we must always have faith that unforeseen things may happen. Think especially of married people: sometimes it seems that there is nothing more to be done but perhaps after years of separation we may find that their aggression decreases and they are able to find each other again and get back together.

Although it is impossible for us to control all our dark instincts and negative feelings, we still need great patience and humility to accept our limitations. We should use the occasion to repent to God of our sins. Meanwhile we wait for the Kingdom where alone there will no longer be shadows or crying or quarrels. For as long as we are on earth all kinds of breakdowns may always occur.

## **Mutual respect**

The second example is *problems of mutual respect*. These are a more directly psychological side to temperamental problems, because we can manage our temperament but not change it.

I start with a basic reflection: respect and the lack of it are extremely important factors in everyday relationships, because even when they are not expressed in words they ooze out of our skin, so to speak. We always immediately notice, or believe we notice, if there is respect or not in our day to day interpersonal relationships.

Often an assumed disrespect of A for B creates a lack of respect in B for A. Thus we get a relationship of mutual negative involvement. But such a relationship makes us to realize that there can also be a relationship of positive involvement: A's respect for B can arouse B's respect for A.

This is where we can intervene. We cannot force another person to respect us, but we can still show respect for them and they may become involved in this process. I like to cite a biblical example, that of Zacchaeus and the miraculous energy produced in him when he felt respected. Zacchaeus thought everyone despised him but when he saw Jesus looking up at him and saying: "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for I must stay at your house today" he felt changed inside. "He made haste and came down and received him joyfully... and he said to the Lord: 'Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold'" (Lk 19:5-8).

The man Zacchaeus was changed because he realized that someone whom he thought did not respect him - as he was a sinner and an outcast - actually did.

In relationships between fellow workers respect is very important, even though it is sometimes difficult to express because of a third kind of problem which I shall now describe briefly.

## **Expressing communion**

*Problems of communion.* Communion is a big word, which immediately evokes large realities. We often get excited when we use the word: we want communion, we are in communion, we seek communion.

However we should remember that communion without any actual experience of contact remains abstract. Sometimes some people's desire for communion is great, sincere, but it is not expressed. Respect for others also remains abstract if it is not expressed. It is not perceived and, without practical expression, communion remains a mere pious wish.

I remember a saying by a colleague of mine, Father Ignace de la Potterie, a great scholar of the Gospel of John. He used the French phrase: *Cela va sans dire*, it goes without saying, without any need of being said. But when he spoke about problems of communion he often repeated: *Cela va sans dire, mais il va beaucoup mieux si on le dit*. It goes without saying, but it goes much better if it is said! Sometimes we hear: The other person knows, should understand, should grasp it intuitively.

But it is much better to say it. We often do not communicate because we think the other person knows, ought to know, can see, can understand. There can be a terrible inhibition that prevents us from putting things into words and then misunderstandings arise, fears, mutual blame, when one thinks the other disapproves, disagrees. We all often fail here; I often fail, I accuse myself and examine my conscience. Perhaps it is sometimes tiredness or nervousness or overwork that prevents us expressing things that we think are obvious.

### **The risk of inadequate of communication**

Our fourth kind concerns *problems of inadequate communication*. They are important because they make up the web of daily intercourse. Firstly, smooth communication between people is difficult. Perhaps we might think it is really easy, from when the child communicates instinctively, with its whole body. Professor Fulvio Scaparro, a specialist in development psychology, drew a very interesting picture of the development of infant communication. He said the small child communicates with its whole body. For example, when it realizes its mother has come home, it gets excited, shouts, toddles to meet her, exuding joy from every pore. Then the child learns to communicate in words, and its communication becomes more specific, it is whittled down to the point where a fourteen-year-old watching television when his mother comes home may just give a slight wave without even turning to her. Thus communication has become more specific and reduced. It often remains that way with adults: very reduced communication, in which gestures are sparing or considered unimportant.

Here I should like to mention some kinds of communication that are lacking, insufficient, appropriate or exaggerated (because communication also requires its just measure ).

**- One kind of communication failure is that called the *fait accompli*:** that is, the fact is left to communicate by itself. One may hear things said in the pastoral Council that one knew nothing about, or hear in a sermon things giving you to understand that a decision has been made but this has never been even minimally communicated.

This type of communication via *faits accomplis* often happens in families, and may be taken to extremes. I'm getting married tomorrow, you know. Shock communication, caused by fear of communicating, wanting to keep everything secret, an instinctive inability to communicate.

**- Forms of communication which are not complete failures but insufficient** frequently occur. One form goes like this: It's up to him to ask, if he asks me I'll tell him, but if he doesn't ask it means he is not interested. Another is to skate over something in a rapid and vague way (but I told you!). Literally **the thing has been said, but it has not really been communicated**. We all often fail in this way, because life is complicated, there are thousands of problems and we prefer to excuse ourselves by leaving things up in the air and then saying they have been said and should have been understood.

**Another form of insufficient communication is the system of little notes.** You arrive in your room and find a little note, about who knows what. And each time it is a surprise.

It is not that a little note cannot be useful, sometimes, as a means of communication because it is not merely spoken and at times it is better to write. But the thing is to find the right means of communication. Communication which mistakes its means, exaggerates in one way or another or is too self-important is insufficient.

Appropriate communication is that in which everything finds its right medium. Of course it is difficult always to do this. We often fail and therefore we should be ready to forgive others' mistakes. It would be a pity to demand that others should always be perfect in their ways and means and times of communication.

We can always find fault with others, if they have not said something or have not said it well or said it at the wrong time. If we are looking for faults we will always find them.

Awareness that we also fail will help us to take pity on others and perhaps pity, patience, the ability always to take up the thread of discourse again, are truly appropriate communication.

Another characteristic of appropriate communication: communicate a little more than what is strictly necessary, go a little bit further. Because communication is a form of affluence, of wealth and it does not admit of meanness. This is the kind of communication we should strive for as hard as we can, with all our experience. It may take a lifetime and in spite of all our care we may still fail.

## **Improving the level of communication**

What are the remedies for insufficient communication, which can lead to hostility and wars between peoples and groups?

From daily experience I note three useful means of improving the communication level a little in the Church, especially in our relationships with our fellow workers.

**The first is a sense of humour about ourselves and reality.** If we expect too much of ourselves or others, the communication is spoilt. It is important to be able to laugh at ourselves, at situations, difficulties in communication, because it helps us to re-establish the relationship patiently. We should not be too self-important, or take as our motto *nihil sine me*: that is, I have to know everything, be acquainted with everything, see everything, and the slightest thing that I am not told is an offence, an insult, an affront to communication. We have to accept that there will be many gaps in communications.

**The second is to express in an appropriate way what is truly lacking in the communication, to say so constructively.**

This needs intuition, good sense, intelligence. If, for example, I realize that someone has not communicated something important to me - not something silly! - something serious that involves me that I should have known about, I can take two attitudes. I can accuse, saying: You do not consider me because you have not communicated this to me, you exclude me. Or my attitude can be: I am very glad that you have told me so much, I understand that you did not find it possible to communicate it before for lack of time, but now that I know about it I am glad and I want to work with you.

This is a way to succeed in saying something positively which involves the other person and gives him to understand that perhaps there has been a gap but now it has been filled.

**The third is an important saying of Paul's in his Letter to the Romans**, where he speaks of vendettas and punishment. "Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all" (Rom 12:17-18). Here we have all the Gospel wisdom. "If possible," "so far as it depends upon you." Paul knows that living in peace with all does not depend on us alone. He continues: "Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (vv. 19-21).

This is the fundamental rule for communication and working together - a rule that is highly evangelical and capable of changing lives and communities. This rule puts us in a right and positive position so that we take the situation in hand and live the fullness of the Gospel.