

## Community life, fraternal life, identity and sense of belonging

"The holier they are, the more conversational they are with their sisters"

**"I want to share with this family  
the gift of the Teresian charism and strengthen the bonds  
of communion and belonging  
in the service of the Kingdom"**

**Art. 15, STJ Constitutions**

### INTRODUCTION

Starting with the third theme of the Itinerary, we invite you to remember the Life and Work of Teresa of Jesus in order to understand the meaning of the phrase: **"the holier they are, the more affable they are in their conversations with the Sisters"** (C41,7). In these 150 years, looking at our lives and communities, **could Teresa of Jesus be telling us something about our way of understanding and living life in community?**

Does this shared calling continue to be a valid witness for a world where narcissism and self-referentiality are increasingly the measure by which relationships and the very meaning of life are valued? In our way of living together, is this imperative to "make Jesus known and loved," which we reflected on in the previous theme, reflected? Does our daily encounter with the Lord commit us to humanize the immediate, everyday space where we share our lives with others?

In this encounter, we invite you to reflect on community life as a consequence of our commitment to live a profound encounter with the Lord in prayer, and as an alternative that continues to be a prophetic witness in an individualistic, narcissistic, and fragmented world.

### WE PREPARE THE HEART

***"I remember that the Jesuit Toño García once spoke to us about the call with such passion that it stuck with me; he said something like this: 'With the same force with which I have been called, I have also been called together with others. Often, vocation is experienced as a gift, while convocation is seen as an inconvenience.' We need to discover the gift of the Spirit that is hidden in a life woven together with others, with shared projects and visions: why have we been called together? For whom?"***  
**(Mariola López Villanueva)**

We invite you to take some personal time to return to your prayer journey and perceive how it affects your relationship with the community and the successive conversions throughout your personal history. Teresa, in her writings, leads us to understand that the encounter with Jesus Christ and his Humanity leads to a conversion of life and, consequently, to an integration of all dimensions of the person. With her, take a journey through your experience of "calling" throughout these years in the Company.

Some suggestions for personal reflection:

- ➔ **Become aware** that God cares for me, for my sisters in community, and that He knows exactly what we need most at this moment in our lives (V22,9).
- ➔ **Remember** how I react to setbacks and the "no's" I receive in life. How do they affect community life?
- ➔ **Perceive and highlight** the effects of prayer throughout my life as a consecrated Teresian and the transformations that took place during my life and in the community.
- ➔ **To go through my heart**, sisters, situations, places where I have felt strengthened by the community experience. To be grateful for what I have learned... what I have received. Likewise, to recognize how in those difficult situations that come to mind, I was able to grow and learn that it is the "continuous friction" that shapes us and teaches us to be better people. Forgive those I still have to forgive... and ask for the capacity to welcome those I still have to learn to welcome.

## WE MET

**“Living in unity and harmony and standing with the poor are prophetic signs of the Kingdom and a means of promoting the interests of Jesus”  
(Art. 18, STJ Constitutions)**

We begin our meeting by invoking the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds and hearts, and we prepare to share in the community what the phrase from the formula of vows that begins this theme of reflection means, reflecting our consecration and belonging to the Society of Jesus.

1. **We invoke the Spirit together** (with a song, with the prayer "**Come, Holy Spirit**", with a prolonged silence...).
2. In silence, with instrumental music, **we read these texts that prepare us for sharing:**

**“May it always be said of all the daughters of the Society, who are extremely solicitous in preserving unity of spirit in the bond of peace, what was said of the first Christians: Cor unum et anima una” (Cf EEO II, p 71)**

**“The members of religious communities are not together because they have sought each other out. They have not been brought together by love, friendship, or mutual interest. They have been brought together by a common calling, a common faith, and a common mission. If they disregard these theological elements, the members of the community may build a group of singles, or friends, or even an apostolic team, but not an evangelical community of brothers or sisters.” (Felicísimo Martínez, Where is Religious Life Headed?)**

3. Song: **The best prayer is to love, God has given me sisters, or another song we know.**

## **WE SHARE OUR STORIES**

Offer a space of time for each sister to share her personal reflection, and for the community, in an attitude of listening, to welcome God's presence in her life. We share from our lives, using one of these guidelines:

- Share important moments in personal and/or community life that marked a new way of perceiving and living community life.
- In what ways, in our environment and mission, can our community help to acquire (or grow) that new awareness of community identity that we spoke of in our last General Chapter as an "echo" of Fratelli Tutti?

## **CONCLUSION**

Take a few moments to summarize how Teresa's statement is real in our lives or if it is just a statement: the holier, the closer to others, the more affable, the friend of good conversations, with community lightness, welcoming each sister in the community, deep respect for each one's history.

## **THANKSGIVING TIME**

- Song of thanksgiving.
- Invite the Sisters to an attitude of welcome to give us the embrace of peace.

## WE DEEPEN

Below are some texts that may help in personal and community reflection before or after the community meeting.



### **SAINT TERESA OF JESUS. THE WAY OF PERFECTION 41.7**

*“So, sisters, do everything you can to be affable and understanding with all the people you deal with, so that they will love your conversation and desire your way of life and treatment, and not be frightened and intimidated by virtue. This is very important for religious women: the holier they are, the more conversational they should be with their sisters. And even if you feel sad that their conversations do not go as you would like them to, never be surprised by them if you want to benefit and be loved. This is what we must strive for: to be affable, and to please and satisfy the people we deal with, especially our sisters”*

### **Understanding our community life in the light of Teresa of Jesus: (Assunta Romio)**

In these 150 years, looking at our life and communities, could it be that Teresa of Jesus is telling us something about our way of being and acting, with a heart on fire and in love with Jesus Christ, as our Founder dreamed? The Saint's personal choice was decisive when she decided to invest time in what she believed to be a way of life. That meant embracing life with all it has to offer. The secret is to place oneself in God's hands (C23,2). Teresa invites us to observe how to use the time we have available to devote ourselves in the best possible way to doing good and being in the company of the true Master, Jesus Christ (C26,2). She decided to pay attention to how God was acting within her and to learn the pedagogy of love from the great Master, Jesus Christ.

Teresa mentions that God cares for us and knows what each of us needs at every moment, and asks us to do His will (V22,9), in a process of growth and maturity (V25,14). To do the little that is within our reach (V31,19), taking care to serve God and to see our own nature as divine work (V32,7). In her process, she perceived and assumed a spirituality of encounter with God in the Interior Castle, based on everyday life. And so she became a woman full of life and projects. With Teresa, we learn that love unifies and integrates us from the essence of life, discovering ourselves as creatures loved and cherished by God. That is why her life experience transcended the limits of time, reaching us with the freshness of novelty.

In *The Way of Perfection*, she draws attention to the need to welcome personal and relational difficulties as an opportunity to grow in human and spiritual integration.

According to Teresa, three things are necessary for living in community: one is love for one another; another is detachment from created things; and the third is true humility, which, although mentioned last, is the most important and encompasses all the others (C4,4).

Teresa is, above all, someone who learns from God; she allows herself to be molded by divine pedagogy, both in joy and in pain. In this horizon of learning, she faces many difficulties, but with determination and patience she does not give up on the lessons that God continually offers her every day (V38,9). This certainty gives her a deep inner peace; the confidence that she is following the path that gives her life meaning. All this provokes in her the need to share her process, awakening in others the desire to also walk the path of "the holier, the more affable" (C41,7). The Lord has transformed their interior, thus turning them into generous women devoted to the mission (V35,12), in a small community where all can know, love, and help each other along the way (V36,30).

As Teresianas, we learn from the great teacher the magnificent ability to communicate, establish and expand relationships, helping people to perceive that they possess an inner wealth: the presence of God. Especially in the Letters, she is evident as a person with a very human profile: she welcomes, guides, warns, encourages, and has a deep respect for each person's rhythm. She shows herself to be a charitable person, a companion on the journey, and a guide. With originality, she leads and encourages the building of networks, with the purpose of motivating people to enter their interior castle and find the Master there. Her heart, enamored and inflamed with love for Jesus Christ, makes Teresa a caregiver for others, a builder of communities, an evangelizer, and a transformer of her environment, the Church, and the world. It is with good reason that Enrique de Ossó, in setting her as a model, also challenges us to "be holy and wise like Teresa of Jesus."

### **Time to Share Life (excerpt), by Mariola López Villanova The Importance of the First Circle**

Several years ago, I met a young Catalan woman in Dublin who told me that she and her partner were LAT. At the time, I didn't know what that meant, and she explained that it stood for Living Alone Together.

Each lived in their own home, but then they would meet and interact in the same way as a couple. The expression made me wonder if at times our community life can also become a little LAT: we live together, but we feel alone. I am not referring here to that fruitful and necessary solitude, but to the kind that causes isolation and that we perceive as indifference.

There are people who share little in community and yet express themselves freely in virtual contacts. At home, they appear rather serious, always very busy with their own affairs, and only show themselves and live more freely outside the community. In the mission, in front of others, I open up, I give myself, I offer my pearl... while at home I only let them see the shell that protects it. Toni Catalá expressed with his characteristic clarity: "The trap is that we miss the concrete, very concrete, 'shabby', happy, exciting, often devastating reality that is the life of the concrete men and women with whom we live, feel, enjoy, and suffer. We need a great deal of lucidity so that we do not escape into the global and lose sight of the concrete."

Although we have been saying for years that we are a community for mission and a community as mission, this second statement is more difficult to put into practice. We need to grow in the conviction that community is a space for mission in itself. I believe that in the experience of women it is important to take care of this first circle, because if it is well established, if it has depth and luminosity, it will have a positive impact on the vibration and expansion of all the others, like concentric circles unfolding from the inside out. The Kingdom begins at home, and we weave it through a more gratuitous presence in the life of the community.

From this rootedness, we can also experience great openness and new possibilities through expanded communities. I notice that women show more complicity and enthusiasm when it comes to participating in the inter-congregational exchanges and projects that are emerging; among men, in general, it seems to be a little more difficult or they have not yet felt the urgency to do so. A more gratuitous presence.

Ignatius' invitation at the beginning of the Exercises is very necessary in our daily lives, as an invitation to find the principle and foundation of community: to live seeking and choosing what best leads to the end for which we have been called together with others. We can lead a self-managed community life, where I try to ensure that others interfere as little as possible in my affairs, that they let me do my own thing, and I let them do theirs; that we do not take each other out of our comfort zones. We ask each other few questions and make compromises. The fruit of such a life diminishes the fruitfulness of the apostolic body and exerts little attraction to the outside world.

When we manage our time and space without taking too much account of the people we live with, the call to community is dimmed and our perception of reality is tinged with the possessive "my": "my time, my tasks, my cell phone," and the immense potential of a shared life is extinguished. The prevailing individualism subtly creeps into our sensibility, numbing us to anything that involves thinking about and managing our lives in relation to those closest to us.

How do I choose to live in community? How much free time do I invest in it? We often comment in our circles, even at the risk of falling into certain clichés, that men are more focused on their own affairs, are more self-managed (they don't need to justify what they do as much), have time and space for what they do, and, as Kolvenbach himself pointed out, can sometimes live in community "as more or less contributing guests in the houses." We feel demanded on many fronts at once, we are more concrete in caring for our own habitat, we live less in our heads and more in our hands, and we also expend more energy on the ins and outs and friction of living together; in a way, we get more involved and complicated in the fine print of everyday life.

We all know that there is no training for a shared life that does not involve a healthy experience of solitude. We need to learn to live an apostolic solitude, which is not a temptation to escapism or a disregard for others, but a place of deeper encounter with the solitude of God and others. We are aware of how "technological distractions" have crept into our intimacy and altered the ways we communicate. Virtual communications have brought us great benefits, but they have also taken away much of that blessed and necessary solitude.

Years ago, a colleague said to me at an assembly: "Before, when we went to bed at night, we used to stop by the chapel; now we have replaced it with the computer room." We don't even need to go to the room anymore: with smartphones, the mobile screen becomes the last thing we look at when we go to sleep and the first thing we open when we wake up, and I'm not just saying this from hearsay.

We urgently need to recover interior spaces of silence and put into practice in our personal and community life the "rules for ordering ourselves on the Internet" that are already circulating; to seek and choose what best leads us to live in a simple and connected way in a complex world, where many are isolated.

**TRUSTING ONE ANOTHER**

When we are called to live with other people, we are invited to consider each one of them as if they had been entrusted to us personally (cf. Jn 21:15), as if each member of the community had something to do with my following of Jesus in this particular time and place; they are my first link to the Kingdom, what happens to them has to do with me, their joys and sorrows need to find resonance in me. And there is no possible ascent to Jerusalem that is not tinged with the small passions of living together. This sense of interdependence, when it is healthy, generates humanizing contacts within and outside the home. These contacts require daily gestures that strengthen bonds: mutual interest, a word of encouragement and complicity, silent closeness in the face of unconfessed pains and losses, anticipating each other's needs... and so many small gestures that maximize the value of living together.

The community is the place where we can exercise our love, affection, and interest on a daily basis. Daily contact kneads and humanizes. Habitual relationships wear us down and are, at the same time, the main workshop where the resistance and rough edges of the self are polished. It is clear that we do not choose those with whom we live and that we cannot change them, nor expect them to understand us, nor be our friends if the gift is not given... But once all this is accepted, I need to believe that the lives of these people with whom I share my home have something to do with me and that my path to God today passes through them; then I am ready to welcome this calling as a blessing and a challenge: it is Another who has brought us together to go beyond ourselves.

When the desert ammas were asked how to know if a disciple was very close to God, they would say something like this: "If she covers her sister's fragility with tenderness." Compassion led these spiritual teachers to a keen understanding of the internal struggles of others.

They cultivated a tender, vulnerable, and expansive heart, and vigorously rejected any critical or judgmental attitude. They taught that self-knowledge is essential for living together, since awareness of our own weaknesses is an opportunity to deepen our compassion for the weaknesses of others and lighten their burdens. For them, our relationship with our sisters and brothers reflects the measure of our inner life; we are therapists to each other in our daily lives. And only when we dare to show our own vulnerability, when we let go of our defenses, do we paradoxically also become capable of healing.

We need to create ample spaces of trust and believe, as Toni Catalá says, "that reality gives more of itself," that the other gives more of themselves and that we have no idea of the fears that cross their hearts.

When I have accompanied people from the same community, I have been able to see this more clearly: the need each person has for appreciation and recognition, and the difficulty they have in expressing affection. We desire a life of greater warmth, more evangelical, of greater mutual interest, but we do not know how to generate it, and wanting to be right plays tricks on us. It is all part of the fabric of our journey towards God, because without these little daily humiliations, how could we dare to appeal to the desire to conform to the poor and humble Jesus?

There is a statement by Madeleine Delbrel that strikes me every time I come back to it: "We delude ourselves if we think we can adopt a kind of immobility without consequences. When we are not a source of happiness, it is rare that we do not cause at least a little harm." If we do not make the people we live with a little happy, we are likely to hurt them unintentionally. We need to ask for this as our daily bread: to be a blessing to the people with whom we share our lives, to be a source of joy for them. If we live this first circle in the spirit of the Visitation, from the embryo of the community we will spread outwards and our communities will be able to become good news for the poor and the little ones.