

# Fraternity

## *The grace and responsibility of fraternal communion*

In the first Lenten meditation, we entered into the heart of Francis' conversion. We saw how grace brought about a true change in his taste, an alteration of his sensibility that transformed the way in which the Poor Man of Assisi saw himself, others and reality. The encounter with the lepers, the progressive detachment from worldly ambitions, and the choice of humility as a concrete form of baptismal life showed us that conversion does not arise primarily from an effort of the will, but from a response to a God who, with His grace, goes before us and calls us. It is a journey that is not completed once and for all, but one that continually begins anew.

That conversion, however, did not remain a solitary experience for Francis. At a certain point the Lord gave him brothers. And it is precisely this gift, unexpected and gratuitous, but also profoundly demanding, that is at the centre of today's meditation. Fraternity is not an accessory of spiritual life, nor a favourable context in which to grow in grace more easily. It is the place where conversion really takes place: the most serious test and, at the same time, the most eloquent sign of what the Gospel can do in our lives.

The journey we will attempt to make is divided into five stages. First of all, the origin of Franciscan fraternity as a gift received. Then, the realism of the Scripture in the face of denied fraternity, with the story of Cain and Abel. Next, the need for a love that goes beyond simple cordiality. Then the Christological foundation without which no fraternal bond can truly endure. And finally, the eschatological horizon, in which lived fraternity already becomes, in a way, a foretaste of eternal life.

## **1. The gift of brothers**

At the beginning of his conversion, Francis lived alone. Then the Lord gave him brothers, and it was a great surprise for him. In his Testament, he recalls it as follows:

“And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel” (*Testament* 14, Franciscan Sources 116).

Francis had not thought about founding a religious group. The arrival of his companions Bernard and Peter compelled him to listen to God again and ask himself once more what His will was. The three then entered a church, opened the sacred texts, and sought their path there. They understood that they would

live according to the Gospel: working with their own hands, in communion with the Church, proclaiming penance and alternating moments of retreat with life among the people.

Thus, the fraternity was born. It included nobles and commoners, rich and poor, clergy and laity. Francis wanted there to be no relations of power or superiority among the friars, as was the case in society at the time. Everyone was to bear the same name: Friars Minor. The form of the first Franciscan fraternity sought to be faithful to the teaching of Jesus: "You have one teacher, and you are all brethren. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven" (Matthew 23:8-9).

Reading Francis' writings, one immediately senses his desire for a lively, intense fraternity full of human warmth. It is not surprising, then, that the Rules contain very clear and concrete instructions:

"All the brothers are not to have power of domination. But whoever wishes to be great among them should be their minister and servant. And he who is great among them must become small. Nor should any brother speak evil or do evil to another. Far from it, they should serve and obey one another through the love of a willing spirit" (*Regula non Bullata* V, 9-13, Franciscan Sources 19-20).

And again:

"And, wherever the friars are and find themselves, let them mutually show themselves to be among their family members. And let them without fear manifest to one another their own need, since, if a mother nourishes and loves her own son according to the flesh, how much more diligently should he love and nourish his own spiritual brother?" (*Regula Bullata* VI, 7-8, Franciscan Sources 91-92).

In these words, one perceives the same spirit that inspired the first Christian communities: "The company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common" (Acts 4:32).

Yet brotherhood was by no means an easy experience for Francis and his companions. Some passages from the *Regula non Bullata* offer a glimpse of very real tensions and difficulties. Francis's words seem to derive precisely from situations he experienced: "And all the brothers should guard against slandering and disputing with words ... Nor should they quarrel among themselves ... And they should not become angry ... They should not judge nor condemn" (*Regula non Bullata* XI, 1-13, FF 36-37).

From these words, we can understand why Francis was convinced that the life of the friars should have the Gospel as its only measure. Brotherhood was not – and is not – a place to take refuge in order to live peacefully, as if simply being together were enough to find peace. Rather, it is a space where each person is led back to the depths of their own heart, with all its shadows and resistances.

Our brothers and sisters are a gift from the Lord. But precisely for this reason, their role is not merely to help or support us along the way: they are entrusted to us so that our lives may be transformed. Through them, our hearts are called to be converted, passing – as Scripture says – from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh. Indeed, our brothers and sisters are not given to us to confirm who we already are, but to transform us. In their diversity, in their limitations, and sometimes even in their struggles, they become the concrete space in which God works on our humanity, softening our inflexibility and teaching us to live with a heart that is truer and more capable of love.

Even the Greek word for “brother” alludes to this mystery. *Adelphós* literally means “one who comes from the same womb”. According to the Gospel, this common womb does not simply coincide with our humanity, but has its roots in God, that God whom no one has ever seen and whom the Son has revealed to us (cf. John 1:18). It is precisely this that makes fraternity as precious as it is demanding: the other is not like me nor does he belong to me, but comes from God.

## 2. We become brothers

With great realism, the Scripture tells us that recognizing the other as a brother is by no means an immediate process. Tracing the roots of the violence that runs through human history, the account in Genesis 4 shows, through the troubled relationship between Cain and Abel, that brotherhood is first and foremost denied. It is as if that account were an answer to the question posed by the prophet Malachi: “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?” (Malachi 2:10). The heart of this text, so harsh and so true, is not so much the murder as the lack of brotherhood.

The crux of this original wound lies entirely in a problem of perspective. The Genesis account simply states that God looked with favour upon Abel’s offering, but not upon Cain’s. The text is very concise and does not explain the reason; therefore, over the centuries, attempts at interpretation have proliferated. One of the most plausible arises precisely from a detail in the story: Abel offers the firstborn of *his* flock, while Cain simply presents some fruits of the soil. Abel seems to involve himself in the gift, offering what is most his own and most precious; Cain, on the other hand, seems to limit himself to simply giving something. It is not so much the quality of the offering that makes the difference, but the fact that what is offered truly represents one’s own life. This is why God does not accept Cain’s gift: not to condemn him, but to provoke him. To accept that gesture would mean leaving him convinced that he truly has nothing good to offer. God, however, seems to want to help him believe that even his life can become a gift.

Cain, however, does not interpret God’s gesture in this way. He does not respond to God’s word and does not speak to Abel. The narrative becomes

increasingly pared down, leading up to the tragic act: Cain attacks his brother and kills him. It is not only an act of violence, but the sign of a relationship that has become unbearable. After the crime, guilt overwhelms him. And that is when God intervenes again, in a surprising way: he does not destroy Cain, but protects him, placing a mark on him so that no one will kill him. Even after the evil he has done, God does not abandon him.

This story confronts us with a question we cannot avoid: who is Cain within us? The most natural temptation is to identify with Abel: the innocent victim, the misunderstood righteous one, the one who offers everything and receives nothing in return. It is a reassuring, even uplifting position. But Scripture does not leave us in this comfort. It asks us to take a more honest and difficult step: to recognize that Cain's story has a direct bearing on us.

Within each of us lies the same potential to become rigid, to close ourselves off, to allow resentment to become distance and for that distance to turn into a form of violence. Not necessarily physical, but real: stubborn silence, hurtful words, indifference built up like a wall. We too, very often, utter the word "brother" and speak of "brotherhood" more with our lips than with our hearts. We use them in speeches, in texts, in the stories we tell about ourselves, but how difficult it is to make them true in our daily choices.

Cain's reaction stems from something very simple: the presence of the other. Abel does nothing against him. He lives, offers to God what he has, and is looked upon with favour. But this alone is enough to unsettle Cain, because the other reminds him of a truth that is difficult to accept: that we are not alone and that we are not everything. When we fail to come to terms with this reality, the presence of the other can become unbearable.

The gift of brotherhood starts to become a reality when we stop pointing the finger at others and start to recognize that we ourselves might be the ones primarily responsible for the evil. This decisive step in the process of conversion applies particularly to us Christians. We would love to present ourselves to the world as those who have already solved the problem of brotherhood: as the "good" people who help others, as witnesses to a love that always works. But, fortunately, things are not quite like that.

The Gospel opens up a different perspective, far more liberating. The people who truly manage to do good are not the "good", but those who have had the courage to acknowledge their own shadow. Not those who have built up a good image of themselves, but those who have seen their own potential for violence and have entrusted it to God, discovering that His face is slow to anger and great in mercy. Authentic brotherhood does not arise from those who have never hurt anyone, but from those who have recognized that they are capable of doing so and decide never to do it again. This is what the experience of mercy teaches: those who know they have been forgiven learn not to repay with evil.

### 3. Loving more

Recognizing that the potential for Cain also dwells within us is not the end of the journey, but the beginning. A very practical question immediately arises: how does this lack of fraternity manifest itself in everyday life? Not always – indeed, almost never – in the extreme forms of physical violence. More often, it takes on subtler forms, though no less painful. We may marginalize the other person, ignore what they say, or dismiss what they do as unimportant. Sometimes we even try to reduce the space they occupy beside us, as if their presence were a problem to be controlled.

The Franciscan tradition preserves a letter that Francis wrote to one of his ministers between 1221 and 1223, when the Order was growing rapidly and the inevitable tensions of fraternal life were beginning to emerge. The recipient is a weary and discouraged friar: some of his brothers are behaving in a difficult manner, and he feels that this is preventing him from living his relationship with God well. For this reason, he thinks the solution might be to distance himself, perhaps retreating to a hermitage to find some peace.

Francis replies to him in a surprising way. He does not tell him to correct his brethren, nor to withdraw. Instead, he suggests that he should look upon that very hardship as the place where he can truly follow Christ. For this reason, he urges him to regard even obstacles and offences as opportunities for grace:

“Those things which impede you to love the Lord God, and whatever else would be an impediment for you or the other friars, even if they whip you, all these you ought to hold on to for the sake of grace. And want it so and not something else. And love them who do these things to you. And do not desire anything from them, except as much as the Lord will give to you. And in this love them; and do not want that they be better Christians. And let that be more to you than a hermitage” (*Letter to a Minister*, Franciscan Sources 234).

From this perspective, fraternity is not a burden to be endured, but the place where the truth of our spiritual life is revealed. Francis goes so far as to say that the hallmark of the Gospel is mercy towards a brother who has erred:

“[Let] there be no friar in the world, who will have sinned, as much as one can sin, who, after he has seen your eyes, will never leave without your mercy, if he seeks mercy. And if he does not seek mercy, you are to ask from him, if he wants mercy. And if he would sin a thousand times before your eyes, love him more than me for this ... and you will always pity such ones” (Franciscan Sources 235).

What the minister experienced as an obstacle thus becomes, in Francis' view, the truest place of encounter with God. Fraternal relationships marked by hardship are not mere setbacks, but the concrete path through which we learn the logic of the Gospel.

A very similar dynamic is also found in Saint Paul's brief Letter to Philemon. The apostle writes to a Christian named Philemon regarding his slave Onesimus. After a conflict with his master, Onesimus had fled and taken refuge with Paul, who was in prison at the time. Paul welcomes him, proclaims the Gospel to him and leads him to faith. Then he takes a courageous decision: instead of keeping him with him, he sends him back to his master. But he does so by accompanying his return with a request that changes everything. He writes, in fact, that Onesimus must be received "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother" (Philemon 16).

In this very brief passage from the New Testament, what is particularly striking is the way in which Paul presents his request. He would have the authority to impose it, but chooses not to do so. He prefers to appeal to Philemon's freedom and asks him, "in the name of love", to take the right course of action himself. Paul does not engage in a theoretical discussion about slavery. He does something more radical: he introduces a new logic into that relationship. In the light of the Gospel, even a relationship marked by power can be transformed into a fraternal relationship.

For this reason, the short letter to Philemon has become, in the Christian tradition, a very concrete example of how relationships can be renewed when we bring a greater love into play. On the occasions that relationships break down and communion is wounded, the Gospel does not suggest, first and foremost, that we defend our own rights, but that we seek the greatest good that is always possible: that which allows us to recognize the other no longer as an adversary or a debtor, but a brother loved by the Lord.

#### **4. From death to life**

But is it really possible to go that "extra mile" in the experience of brotherly love? Is this Gospel demand – which at times seems far removed from real life – within our reach? We Christians – and we religious in particular – often live in environments where everything appears orderly and cordial: there is no shouting, no quarrelling, people greet one another kindly, and formally correct relationships are maintained. Yet we know that this outward calm does not necessarily correspond to true and deep relationships. On the contrary, as the years go by, we all accumulate in our hearts the weight of ill-chosen words, hasty judgements, missed glances, relationships that have been wounded or simply left to fade away over time.

Why, then, should we return to this fragile ground and try to start afresh? Francis' answer is decidedly simple: because our relationships are based on a bond of freedom. Not on sympathy or affinity, but on the fact that God has chosen us and called us to live together in the Church as brothers and sisters.

When Francis insists that "spiritual" brothers and sisters should love one another more than their flesh-and-blood relatives, he is neither spiritualizing reality nor appealing to good intentions. He is saying that, as brothers and

sisters in faith, we must have the courage to go beyond the surface of our relationships: to face conflicts, accept differences, and not flee when relationships become complicated. This becomes possible only if we remember where our bond originates and who has the power to be able to guarantee it.

It is something that Jesus Himself alludes to in an episode recounted in the Gospel of Mark. One day his mother and his brothers arrive from elsewhere and look for Him. Someone tells Him this whilst He is sitting in the midst of the crowd. Jesus then looks at the people around Him and asks: “‘Who are my mother and my brethren?’ And looking around on those who sat about him, he says, ‘Here are my mother and my brethren! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister, and mother’” (Mark 3:33-35).

This is not a rejection of the natural family, nor a gesture of emotional distance. Jesus is revealing something deeper: there is a bond stronger than blood, more stable than kinship, more authentic than our sympathies. It is the bond that arises from doing the Father’s will together. It does not depend on what has befallen us – birth, origin, character – but on a shared choice: to live in obedience to God’s word. In this regard, Jesus does not abolish the family: He re-establishes it on a new foundation, which is the relationship with Him and obedience to His word.

This has very concrete consequences for the life of the Church. A Christian community – a religious fraternity, a parish, a presbytery – is not primarily a human group whose members have chosen one another out of affinity or shared ideals. It is an assembly summoned by the voice of God, who precedes us and makes our being together possible. For this reason, fraternity is not something we build on our own: it is a gift we receive from above.

But precisely for this reason it needs to be nourished and cherished, by continually returning to the source of the Spirit and to a living relationship with Christ. When this source becomes clouded – when prayer becomes routine, when the Word no longer touches us, when the sacraments are celebrated without the participation of the heart – even fraternal bonds slowly begin to lose their substance. The outward forms remain: the greeting, the smile, the politeness. But the substance weakens or is lost. This life cannot be rebuilt through relationship techniques or a mere effort of good will. It is found only by once again allowing ourselves to be reached by the gaze of Christ.

It is the Apostle John who says it with disarming simplicity: “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love remains in death” (1 John 3:14). It is a powerful statement. John does not say that we love our brothers and sisters because we have passed from death to life, as if new life automatically produced this kind of love. He asserts almost the opposite: it is precisely in loving our brothers and sisters that we can verify whether Christ’s Pasch is truly at work within us.

Lived fraternity thus becomes the place where baptism reveals whether it is truly bearing fruit. It is there that the new life received in the Spirit ceases to be

a distant promise and becomes a tangible reality: a shared history, mended relationships, and renewed patience.

The criterion is simple and leaves no room for evasion: the Pasch has begun to work within us the moment we discover that we can welcome others even when they hurt us, when they disappoint us, when they behave as adversaries. Not because we have become stronger or more virtuous, but because something within us has already died and something new has started to live.

## 5. Eternal life

The Pasch is the criterion according to which we can measure our fraternal relationships: from the way we treat our brothers and sisters, we can tell whether we have truly passed from death to life. We often imagine the resurrection of our life in Christ as an event that concerns only the future. In reality, it begins right now and takes shape in the way we live our relationships and learn to love.

A passage from Saint Francis' *Regula non Bullata* illuminates this point very well. We tend to see the brother who hurts us or causes us distress as an obstacle, someone too far removed from our way of thinking, to the point of perceiving him almost as an enemy. Francis, however, turns this perspective on its head: it is precisely that person who can become the means through which God opens us up to eternal life.

“Let us attend, all brothers, to what the Lord says: ‘Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you’. For even the Lord Jesus Christ, whose footsteps we must follow, called his betrayer ‘friend’ and freely gave Himself up to those who crucified Him. They are our friends, and therefore, all those who unjustly inflict on us trials, anxieties, shame and injuries, suffering and torture, martyrdom and death. We should love them greatly, for out of what they inflict on us we have eternal life” (*Regula non Bullata*, Chapter XXII).

This insight of Francis is surprising, because it reverses our natural way of thinking. We imagine that the path towards God depends above all on the good we manage to do for others. Francis, however, invites us to see things differently: sometimes our conversion arises precisely from what others do to us, even when they hurt us or put us to the test. It is a difficult truth to accept, but a very realistic one. Fraternal life is not made up solely of good deeds and easy moments. It is also made up of misunderstandings, wounds and struggles. Indeed, the best opportunities for entering eternal life are found precisely when we are wounded: in those moments we can renounce violence and choose instead the path of forgiveness, allowing God's love to manifest itself and be fulfilled in us.

This greatly broadens our outlook. In daily life, the hardships of fraternity can be onerous. The distances between us, the words that hurt, the misunderstandings that remain unresolved can become painful. Precisely for

this reason, we must never lose sight of the horizon. When we lose the perspective of eternal life, certain hardships become totally unacceptable.

The theme of fraternity does not concern only the life of the Church: it touches upon humanity's deepest longing. In every age and every culture, human beings have dreamed of a society in which people finally live in harmony with one another. It is a yearning that runs through all peoples, transcending languages, cultures and religious traditions. Poets, musicians and artists have imagined a world where people can truly recognize one another as brothers and sisters. Many ideologies and economic models have also sought to build this universal harmony, yet they have discovered how difficult it is to make it a reality for everyone, everywhere.

We who believe in the Son of God made flesh hold in our hearts a simple and humble conviction: universal fraternity becomes possible only when humanity rediscovers its openness to the transcendent. As Pope Francis recalled in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*:

As believers, we are convinced that, without an openness to the Father of all, there will be no solid and stable reasons for an appeal to fraternity. We are certain that "only with this awareness that we are not orphans, but children, can we live in peace with one another". For "reason, by itself, is capable of grasping the equality between men and of giving stability to their civic coexistence, but it cannot establish fraternity" (Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 272).

When we recognize God as the Father of all, we learn to regard every person with a dignity that no cultural, social or religious difference can erase. Faith does not separate us from others: rather, it reminds us that no-one can be excluded from our heart, because no-one is absent from the heart of the heavenly Father. Therefore, during these days of Lent, whilst the history of the world continues to be fraught with divisions, wars and conflicts, we Christians cannot limit ourselves to speaking of fraternity as merely an ideal to be attained. We are called to receive it as a gift and, at the same time, to embrace it as a very serious and urgent responsibility.

This task always begins in our immediate surroundings: with the people who share our daily lives with us. It is not uncommon, even within the Church, for differences in sensibilities, outlook or style to become a cause of conflict and distance, to the point of creating genuine polarization. These are signs of how difficult it is to truly embrace the challenge of fraternity. The Gospel journey, however, asks us to take a different step: to recognize others – even when they are different, difficult or far removed from our sensibilities – as brothers and sisters who have been entrusted to us. And to try to listen to them, to understand their reasons, to respect them in a sincere and cordial manner.

We can do this without any fear, indeed with complete freedom, because we know that we have already passed from death to life with Christ. His resurrection does not eliminate the hard work involved in relationships, but it frees us from the suspicion that such effort is in vain. For this reason, we can

take on the work of fraternity in a new way: with gentleness, with respect, and with the confidence that every gesture of true brotherly love – even the most hidden – already belongs to eternal life.

*Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God, grant us wretched ones, for your love's sake, to do what we know you will, and always to will what pleases you, so that, purified within, enlightened within and set ablaze by the fire of the Holy Spirit, we may follow in the footsteps of your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the help of your grace alone may we come to you, O Most High, who in the perfect Trinity and in simple Unity live and reign and are glorified, almighty God for ever and ever. Amen.*

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