

Diocesan priests and community life

Paths of fraternity

Paolo Zago

Carlo Seno

Peppino Barlocco

After several years of priestly ministry in the diocese of Milan, Italy, the authors asked their archbishop for the opportunity to live an experience of community life together. They were assigned to the town of Gorgonzola with its 20,000 inhabitants. The authors tell their experience how they have lived over the past four years.

Priests of communion

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exultate*, Pope Francis writes: "Growth in holiness is a journey in community, side by side with others." (no. 141). And in no. 142: "Each community is called to create a 'God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the risen Lord.'" It is this call to collective holiness that has animated our experience as diocesan priests in Milan.

In our years of priesthood, we have seen that it is not enough to "plan" communion. Rather, it is necessary to learn to live it among priests and among ordained and lay ministers. Exercising one's ministry is not enough. What is important is the *way* it is exercised. There is a need to prioritize faith and spirituality over pastoral practices and "being" over "doing." While living and working in different places, we tried to live this priestly fraternity concretely, such as through a communion of goods among us so we could live poverty within a framework of charity and communion. We also shared our spiritual and pastoral experiences (a communion of faith in the faith). First and foremost, we strove to live the Word of God and to share the experience with the community. We sometimes prepared homilies and activities together and tried to be available to the bishop for any needed requests, etc.

This meant living our ministerial priesthood in service to the 'communion of the community' to foster a reality of co-responsibility. This gradually frees us from clericalism and leads us to live that common priesthood of the faithful in which we are all disciples of the Word. By living in this way, our priestly service and leadership becomes more fraternal.

The Word of God meditated, lived, and communicated in life experiences flows from this and forms the basis of who we are and our act of bringing others to the faith. To evangelize, it is necessary to be evangelized. Our being who we are and meeting one another at this deeper level becomes the place where the "we" of a collective mysticism is born. It is what we continuously tried to incarnate in carrying out pastoral care in the diocese.

The calling to a new step

Then, four years ago, we felt the need to concretize these steps toward communion also in a visible experience of stable community life sustained and supported by the diocese and be a contribution and sign of a different way of being priests that was less individualistic and more communitarian. It seemed that the time had come to try to be a small sign of a new way of living as diocesan priests.

In line with clerical reforms proposed in the Archdiocese of Milan, we turned directly to our archbishop to express our willingness and desire to live a community life experience. He embraced our idea as his own and assigned us to the town of Gorgonzola (with its 20,000 inhabitants) on the outskirts of Milan. There is also an elderly priest, Father Antonio, who lives in a nearby apartment and has joined in our experiment.

It is a compelling experience for us, one imbued with the flavor of the Gospel. We see that together, we go further. But of course, it is not easy. We learned that every point of view is precious when we know how to listen to one another and be open to our ideas being discussed or challenged. We need to be ready to let go of ideas at times, conscious that our point of view is only one way of approaching a given matter.

But when everyone is ready to take these same steps, something far beyond our individual capabilities emerges. We have the impression that space is left for another 'counselor.' The Spirit comes among us and suggests new paths, sometimes different from all those we had suggested, but one in which each discovers himself. It is an experience well worth trying.

In our own small way in the Gorgonzola pastoral community, we see that each one must learn from the other. And in this way, we grow in proportion to the measure that we learn to listen. We try to begin everything by living this mutual charity. It is indispensable so that Jesus may dwell among us and becomes the basis of every aspect of our lives, "the norm of norms." This happens not only among the three of us living together in community, but also with all the priests in the pastoral area and the deanery.

We have already experienced almost getting into major arguments over differing ideas and viewpoints, because each one was convinced of his own way of thinking. We remain divided until we are ready to let go of our own perspective. Pastoral collaboration alone does not guarantee unity. The Gospel of mutual love must precede it. After all, this is what happens in the families of our community, too. When "doing" is understood as education of children or only practical concerns, it leaves no space for that "yes" and the love that had made the two spouses one. It is something that must be guarded and defended. Just as for

a couple, it is necessary to *love love*, in the same way, we feel our mutual fraternal charity must precede pastoral responsibilities so it is not lived in just an "functional" way.

Concretely, this means trying to ensure that our conversations do not focus exclusively on pastoral issues, but also on that central "choice of God". Our vocations began and found their meaning in this 'choice.' It means allocating time for all of life's aspects: from work to individual health and rest, studies to simple community life, from theological updating to household chores, to moments of personal and communal prayer. In this way, life becomes more harmonious and human. It also means not 'taking sides' among us or with parish laity...and not fueling cliques, jealousies or personal preferences. In a word, it signifies becoming more 'evangelical.'

A path forward for priests and laity

From our unity as priests, we have also seen that a concrete approach to pastoral care cannot be developed by us alone. Rather there is need of a "we" in this synodal journey together, in a lived experience of community discernment with lay people in the community. It means seeking together what the Spirit is asking of us. Thus, it is not priests deciding "what to do". By ourselves, we are not capable of community discernment in understanding what the Spirit is carrying out in our church community and what collaboration he is asking of us. This comes instead from an experience of synodality that we first try to live in the pastoral council and then bring to life in the deanery later. What matters is that each of us shows up for these moments not only with our own ideas -- clearly ready to lose them -- but as a "we" that is capable of creating communion at a broader level. This happened, for example, in our discussion on how to best to set up adult catechesis, preparation for Advent and Lent, and other pastoral initiatives. 'Dying to the ideas of the other' gave birth to new and unexpected light with our parishioners.

We were particularly struck by how the people in the pastoral community "look" at our presence. They do not rejoice in the fact that they have more priests, as we would have thought. Rather they rejoice in the witness of fraternity that we live among us. We see that the mere fact of living together, helping one another, going shopping and building peaceful relationships "evangelizes" much more than our catechesis, lectures and homilies.

This path then brings us closer and makes relationships more beautiful. It increases understanding and unity with the laity and other consecrated persons in the pastoral community, starting from those with whom we share responsibility most closely. They feel less and less like "co-workers" and more and more as participants together in a synodal Church.

Mysticism of the 'we'

Pope Francis calls us to live "the mysticism of the 'we.'" This is what we strive to live despite our human limitations. It is a priestly and ecclesial "we" that extends to all people of good will. Although we are only at the beginning of this human and spiritual adventure, it has already filled us with gratitude to God. We truly hope that everyone will one day be able to experience this too.