

The Community Project

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1. Importance

The Constitutions give us a practical way of renewing community life: the Community Project. This can be a very efficacious means for renewal if the members accept it as a “covenant.” If by dialogue based on common experience we can arrive at greater unity of ideas and an expression of common judgments, we can commit ourselves before God and our confreres to live a covenant of common action whatever we have agreed upon. The Community Project will be the written witness to this covenant.

It is evident that creating and living out a covenant demands much creativity and responsibility of the local community. There are no structures imposed from outside. We must create structures to oblige us from within. And it goes without saying, a covenant implies that having reached common decisions and created local structures, we must fulfill and live them. Every project is a long road to travel. Without unity, effort, commitment, and concrete action, it becomes a dead letter (Cf. R. Maloney, *The Way of St. Vincent*, Salamanca 1993, p. 167).

2. Goals

1st That the local community become a true sign of the Kingdom of God, a school of friendship, fraternity, prayer, correction, and pardon; a producer of truly human, spiritual missionaries in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized.

2nd That each community undertake a pilgrimage to the sources of the Congregation of the Mission: the gospel of Jesus Christ, the spiritual experience of St. Vincent centered on Jesus Christ the evangelizer and servant; and the poor, to whom the good news must be proclaimed, that they contribute to the “refounding” or “revitalization,” which means returning to the base and to the essential elements of the Congregation, so that it become an authentic spiritual missionary movement in the midst of a world characterized by an increasing consciousness of today’s diversity of sociocultural and ecclesial elements.

3. Structure

A community project must treat of several elements. To achieve a sufficiently clear vision it seems to me convenient to point out seven essential steps we can group in two sections.

A) Proposals

We must be clear on these proposals, since it is only from them that we can gain an adequate understanding of the project: they set the tone by which the community goes forward. After all, the project is an instrument for the community’s growth towards its ideals. If these are poorly defined, the project will not work.

1st Step: Anthropological. Achieving a dynamic understanding of the person: understood as a process of autonomous growth and as an encounter with others, removing the tension between autonomy and dependence.

2nd Step: Theological. Keeping in mind that the basis for the identity of a Christian community is the primacy of the free and gratuitous love of God and his Kingdom of communion (koinonia). Without the immense gratuity of God's love, community life cannot be understood. This gives it its sense and extent. Away from this gratuitous love and its demands, community life can be lost — as has often happened — in purely formal rules of conduct, in distortions of abuse of power, in living by strictly worldly categories.

3rd Step: Psychosocial: Criteria by which we distinguish between healthy and unhealthy community comportment, and the need to learn how to achieve better communication, mutual acceptance, and how to handle conflicts.

B) Elaboration of the Project

Without the previous three prerequisites it would be very difficult to inaugurate a Community Project. This second part contains the four steps necessary for elaboration of the Project.

1st (See): The analysis, community discernment, of the reality, the situation, in which the community lives and works.

2nd (Judge): An experience: understanding acquired through biblical, spiritual, theological reflection, to the end:

- that the community identifies clearly its problems and realizes the need for change, awakening its best internal dynamics so as to begin the process;
- that it bridges the gap between the gospel and the modern and post- modern world, between the spirit of God's Kingdom and the inhumanity of our times;
- that it reaffirm its preferential option for the poor and continue stubbornly proclaiming the Kingdom of God, not as a victory, but as an attraction to a Christian life of prayer and action. The final document of the 1998 General Assembly says: "As the people of God in the service of the Kingdom, following Jesus Christ evangelizer of the poor, we know we have been sent to proclaim the Good News to the poor, to labor in the service of the Kingdom." "Such happiness, my brothers, to help the poor know God, to announce Jesus Christ to them, to tell them that the Kingdom of heaven is near, and that Kingdom belongs to the poor" (SVP XI, 387, Conference 195, Spanish Edition).

3rd (Consequence): Strategically planning priorities, objectives, and means, by which the community will collaborate with others of the social reality which surrounds it, for the changes and dynamics of change awakened by enlightenment and resulting in concrete commitments.

4th (Act): The application of the Project to ordinary life, and its evaluation, that is, putting it into practice.

4. Conclusions

4.1. Community life takes us into a privileged ambiance of encounter. But this encounter can frustrate so that the community be reduced to just a group of solitary people, often hard workers. Perhaps the more the work, more solitary. A vocation to community life is found in the will to build fraternity.

4.2. Fraternal life, as a task, is a continual leaving, a call to get out of one's self, an abandoning of narcissism, a growth in sensibility to move toward encountering my brother.

Coming together in union is our promised land. As long as our journey endures, brothers and conflicts are the burning bush from which God calls us to serve him "in spirit and in truth," in order to advance toward liberation from the individualism that enslaves us. When a religious experience turns its back on the cries of one's brothers, Yahve is replaced by the idol of narcissism. Only "relationship with other humans is the authentic allegory of relationship with God," writes M. Buber (*I and You*, Caparros, Madrid 1993, p. 95).

4.3. The Community Project should help us to live and construct fraternity understood as gift and task, and to urge us on to the evangelization and service of the marginalized poor. But what is happening with our community projects? Are they creating better quality of life and reviving our interpersonal relations, our common faith, our communication and our mission? What is failing in their conception, elaboration, and application?

It would be good to pause for a moment and look at our projects, since the quality of our community life depends in part on them.