



“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples: if you have love for one another”

Communion in the Bible

Preliminary remarks

Human condition is marked by two opposite tendencies: unification and self-assertion in autonomy and originality. In the different historical periods, the two tendencies are accentuated according to a pendulum motion. It seems to be argued that it is currently the second to prevail. This affirmation is based on the following phenomena: a) emphasis on freedom as independence and possibility of self-realization without obstacles; b) fear to be equated with others; c) awareness of one's dignity, depending on which one thinks he/she can offer an original contribution to society (in a quite ecclesiastical context, we speak of charisms and claim 'birthrights'); d) easy identification between one's own (immediate) exigencies and his own rights.

Despite the awareness of some simplifications, we have to recognize that such phenomena sharpen the distances between people, which, almost reacting to mass forms, defend themselves from others by erecting barriers. The social phenomenon of defending one's own particular against 'globalization', can also be a sign of this. We seem to be living in a kind of contradiction: on one hand, styles and behaviors are reproduced everywhere, on the other hand, we want to affirm what is our own (cf. in civil life the defense of one's culture; in ecclesiastical life the affirmation of one's originality [the local Churches]; in religious life the search for the original charism).

The sense of using the Bible to acquire antidotes

The Bible remains for Christians an essential reference to learn how to live and to introduce antidotes into the world against tendencies mortifying the person. If one wants to believe *1 Jn 1: 1-3*, the purpose of Christians is to create communion, because they drew this from the action of God in Jesus Christ. If in the New Testament we use the term *koinonia*, that means participation – to share – and then communion, this means that the experience of the first Christian generations was perceived as creation-communication of bonds, in a world marked by divisions. The place of that experience was the community.

When we read the texts of the New Testament concerning the community, the risk of overloading the Christian community with meaning, to the point of making it an imaginary place, must be taken into account; on the other hand, [it must be taken into account] the temptation to demythologize it, to the point of losing its value and depriving it of a possible goal. Experience says that there should be no illusion about community life. It remains difficult and therefore a permanent challenge: the desire and the efforts to achieve it perpetually collide with the native instinct for self-preservation that prevents us from reaching a 'satisfactory' community life. In the face of this observation, two specular attitudes can arise: either strenuously to denounce 'selfishness' as contrary to the will of the Lord or to declare the impossibility of community life, and then resign ourselves with depression to that fact, considering that any image which goes against our pessimistic vision appears to be utopic. Both of these attitudes seem to find place particularly in the present circumstances, marked by "sovereignist" tendencies.

It will be necessary to proceed from the perspective of founded hope. This is what we would like to do in this brief intervention. We will do this by letting ourselves be guided by some texts of Scripture read in



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the current context. These are texts that concern the Christian community in general (the Church), but they can also be useful for reflecting on smaller community styles.

Fundamental reference point

The experience of the early Christian communities is generally seen described in the summaries of Acts 2: 42-48 and 4: 32-35, which should however be read with 'realism', beyond all romanticism. Two attitudes could arise in front of the two texts of Acts. On one hand, they could be taken as indicative of the goal to be reached; on the other hand, as a presentation of a utopia, which does not take into account the condition of believers. To justify the two opposite attitudes, episodes from history could also be called to the rescue: the small communities that have 'isolated' themselves from the rest of the Church and society; the *de facto* acceptance of a Church of sinners without pretensions of perfection. The dual attitude lacks critical awareness in the same way. It does not succeed, in fact, in putting history and normative text together: in the first case, because the text is asserted as an absolute paradigm, and in the second case, because history is believed to be the only parameter for evaluating the possibilities. The two texts instead, given their location, want to indicate at the same time a possibility and a stimulus in the search for paths; therefore neither for utopianism nor skepticism.

The placement of the texts as an indication of their meaning

The first text is placed as a summary and almost as an outcome of the Pentecost event, that is to say that the action of the Holy Spirit has aroused apostolic preaching. However, its visibility goes beyond this preaching but even manifests itself in the life of the community gathered. The second text is placed after a new Pentecost (4: 31). We can see a convergence at the basis of the community life briefly described. We do not find so much the desire to unite as the strength of the Spirit. The latter however acts through the preaching of the apostles. And not by chance: indeed in it the event of Jesus is made present particularly his resurrection (cf. 4: 33; 2: 36). Thus the unity of believers has a transcendent foundation. And Luke means above all to demonstrate that, in the small community, the gathering of humanity has started which is previously anticipated by Jesus' choice of the twelve. This suggests that community life is first and foremost a gift of the Spirit as well as the apostolic preaching. In this connection, Acts 2: 24 deserves particular attention. It summarizes the life of the community around four elements; three of which belong to the 'root' of the same ecclesiastical life: the teaching of the apostles, the breaking of the bread, and the prayer. The four elements are then introduced by the present participle *proskarterountes* (also resumed at v. 46), that means assiduous attendance, constant dedication to one thing, and it indicates that these are not transitory, rhapsodic, but permanent actions. The Spirit molded the people mentioned at v. 41 in stable form, and this represents now a model of the life of Christian community. The four elements in Greek are connected differently: the teaching of the apostles looks like the foundation (so the text intends to connect, at the same time, the v. 42 with the preaching of Peter [in this sense, compare also the *de* which is linked to the *men* of v. 41], then the text indicates that the Christian community cannot exist without the resumption of authoritative testimony, which has as its object above all the resurrection of Jesus; cf. 4: 33). The *koinonia* and the breaking of the bread are together to tell the link between them: *koinonia* manifests itself in the Eucharist (we can see here a link with 1Cor 11: 17-22; see moreover v. 45). Finally there is prayer, which is connected with *kai* to say that it is a new element, which will be specified at v. 46, with reference to the temple (since it returns several times in the first chaps. of Acts). The four elements indicate that the power of the saving action of Jesus Christ is made present, in mediated form, in the Christian community. This is the



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meaning of the two Lucan summaries: humanity starts being no longer the same of before; the gathering of the new humanity has now begun, of which Christ is the beginning (cf. the genealogy of *Luke* in 3: 23-38). The Pentecost story, with the possible allusion in the form of a contrast to *Genesis* 11: 1-9 is ended with the description of humanity symbolically reunified in the Christian community. It is no longer a question of historical possibility based on human efforts: these are doomed to fail – as already shown in *Genesis* 11: 1-9. It is rather a saving experience which has historical impact, capable of arousing the esteem (*charis*) of the entire people (*Acts* 2: 47; cf. 4: 33). It does not matter then whether this ideal image of the Christian community is always and everywhere implemented. It is enough that it is observed once to see the hope of its possibility to be reborn as founded on the action of the Spirit. Faced with this statement, the skepticism that would claim to be based on experience cannot find space. To deny the possibility of a true community would be to deny the transforming power of the Spirit.

The paths to reach the realization of the community

By indicating the four elements, Luke also suggests the steps to be taken for a community to be generated. First, *the teaching of the apostles*. This refers to the original event and as such it constitutes a unifying principle, not the result of convergence of opinions (the latter would eventually produce a conventional and fragile unity). It is the result of truth which is given and which requires acceptance by all. Such a truth prevents unity from being imposed by someone: no one can constitute the ultimate principle of unity except the announced event. In this regard, it should be remembered what *Lumen Gentium* writes about both the pope and the bishop: in the two cases the expression “principle and *visible* foundation” is used (no. 23). The fact that the teaching of the apostles is at the beginning of unity indicates that believers are together by virtue of faith and not by other reasons, neither political nor organizational. We could recall what the pastoral document *Communion and community* of 1980's wrote, which speaking of the parish said that the faithful should not be asked for any type of membership other than faith in the Lord Jesus. In this light, we could evaluate the reasons for which divisions arise in Christian communities and to check whether it is generally a matter of reasons other than faith. The unity of the Christian community does not require unanimity on everything: Christian community is not a sect in which, both for adhesion to the leader and defensive compactness, all assume the same language, the same lifestyle, and the same political option, thus building impenetrable barriers to those who do not adapt. We can understand the psychological dynamics typical of social groups, which Christian communities cannot escape; but we should also, precisely in the name of a higher unity, break these dynamics which in fact exclude the new 'arrivals'. What would have become of the early Church if she had maintained the sectarian spirit wanted by someone? Luke probably could not have written the v. 47b of chapter 2 of *Acts*. Second, *mutual aid*. In the two texts, it is admired that no one was needy since *koinonia* was practiced in the community. The term *koinonia*, as mentioned above, means participation. Note that this is not an established rule, but a motion that arises from the Spirit. The needs of everyone are answered. And although the reference seems to be to material goods, we must read the symbolic character of these: they serve to support life and therefore recall everything that is needed to make people feel alive. Moreover, mutual aid is not only expression of communion, but creates it, too. It should be taken into account that these are actions that shape people and social groups. Mutual help and the sharing of goods build the community. Third, *the Eucharist* (called the breaking of bread to highlight the trans-evaluation of the gesture of the head of the family carried out by Jesus in the Last Supper). The unifying value of the Supper of the Lord is based on the fact that it is a memorial of reconciliation (in this regard we can recall 2 *Corinthians* 5: 19; *John* 11: 52; 12:32). The new humanity gathered by the dispersion is formed in



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the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Being assiduous to the breaking of bread means overcoming the insidious forces of division always lurking, and becoming aware that the foundation of one's unity lies in the radical act of the pro-existence [existence for] of Jesus. Lastly, *prayer*. As already said above, it seems we are speaking here of prayer at the temple, where believers showed themselves "by one feeling" (*homothymadon*) (*Acts 2: 46*). The content of this prayer is not indicated, but it can be assumed that it is the usual prayer of the Jewish liturgy. This too serves to shape the community, thus perceived in continuity with the tradition from which it comes, almost the last efflorescence [development] of a path. The final result is the atmosphere of praise in which everything takes place. Life in community is not an effort, but a liberating experience that produces praise (*Acts 2: 47*).

Communion from the Eucharist

In *1 Corinthians 10: 14-22*, the implication of the Eucharistic celebration is highlighted. This emerges first of all from the fact that Paul wants to overcome the division between strong and weak; but then, and above all, from the fact that participation in the same Eucharist makes the same life of Christ flow in everyone, so that believers form a single body. It is on this second reason that the first [to unite strong and weak] is based. When one belongs to the same body by virtue of the same communion in the Eucharist, fences cannot be erected even among people of different maturity in faith. Moreover, the 'strong' should keep in mind the lesson that is transmitted by Scripture: just those who lived the experience of exodus did not enter the promise land. Therefore one should not be overconfident. Instead we should try to live in unity which is derived from participation in the same bread originated from Christ himself. The passage from the Eucharistic body of Christ to the ecclesiastical one finds its most evident expression in *1 Corinthians 10: 17*. In this perspective, the meaning of the formula "the Eucharist makes the Church" can be recovered, with the clarification, the "Body of Christ". The clarification is not at level of detail. Indeed, the metaphor, which in *1 Corinthians 12* simply means the articulation of the faithful having various gifts, here takes on a value that will then be developed in *Ephesians and Colossians*: in the community that manifests itself united, the Lord himself becomes visible. It follows that union with the Lord involves union with his body, and vice versa. Therefore, if communion with demons is maintained, not only communion with the Lord is broken, but also communion with its body. It entails that those who participate in the Lord's table cannot become idolaters (*1 Corinthians 10: 14*). We should remember that worship is functional in seeking life, so that idolatry coincides with seeking life outside communion with the Lord, thus establishing a contradiction. On one hand, we participate in the Eucharistic table; on the other hand, we actively declare that this is not enough to give us vitality. This constitutes a challenge to the Lord. After all, he is told that we do not trust what he can give. Yet it is he who has given his body and blood, which is to say: that he has given his life so that we could have life.

The result verifies both what actually produces life in the members of the community and the relationships lived by them. If in the first case, the verification must be carried out on a personal level, in the second, at community level. Indeed it can be seen that beyond declarations and goodwill, vitality is sought elsewhere than in the Eucharist. It would be enough to recognize where the perception of being 'alive' is based, and, at the same time, what, in fact, participation in the Lord's table produces in one's concrete existence. Perhaps we can conclude that, despite magniloquent declarations, the relationship between Eucharist and life is not so solid. As regards the verification of communion in the community, it cannot be forgotten that Paul in the first chapters of *1 Corinthians* recalls unity founded on the cross. This is a theme dear to Pauline Letters. It would be enough to remember *Ephesians 2*. If in *1 Corinthians 10: 14-22*, he refers



to the Eucharistic foundation of communion, he does not stray from the vision just mentioned: unity of the cross and unity of the Eucharist are in deep continuity among them, since the Eucharist is communion with the body and blood given on the cross. Verification therefore entails the relationship of common participation in the Lord's table and the bonds based on dedication: the only attitude which manifests the Lord's dedication and at the same time builds his body. It makes the community a visible sign of the presence of the Lord in the history. It is not difficult here to place a reference to *John* 6: 56 and 15: 1-17, where there is a link between the mutual 'immanence' with Christ and the disciples, and the observance of the commandment of love. And those who live in Christ, thanks to that participation in the Eucharist, can only implement this command of Christ.

In this perspective, we also understand where the Spirit, the origin of community is leading us, that is to be a sign of communion which is the true way of carrying out the mission. Hence we can return to *1 John* 1: 1-3.

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