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Euro-Mediterranean Province of the Society of Jesus
Albania - Italy - Malta - Romania

To the Jesuits of the EUM Province

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CHARACTERISTICS OF APOSTOLIC COMMUNITIES

In the light of the 36th GC, the characteristics of apostolic communities, that we propose here, are to be placed within a very precise dynamic, that of a **pilgrimage**, without which every characteristic would risk remaining only the demanding fulfilment of a pure community "duty".

In the specific case of this dynamic, the mental representation of the place is the experience as "friends in the Lord" made by Ignatius and his first companions: despite the fact that they already were believers, they were amazed and conquered by the vertigo of God's unconditional love for each person and by the need, which became a priority for them, to announce this good news and to transmit Jesus' intimate and saving love, according to that particular way of proceeding that was emerging.

A permanent pilgrimage derived, from Paris to Venice and from Venice to Rome¹. Always on the way, in a community *ad dispersionem*, discovering the beauty of being willing to deepen the gift received, to be on a journey, to be precarious, to encounter, which all endlessly renew the radical need for the other and the Other.

For them, friendship in the Lord, this relational experience and the enthusiasm of the proclamation that follows from it, led to the foundation of the Society; for us, life in the Society is the privileged way to establish, revitalize and desire, on the basis of this good news, ever new "friendships in the Lord".

This willingness to relationships and, in particular, to friendship, demands for certain requirements that each one of us is called to verify and seek within himself: the sincere respect and esteem for the other, an interest in sharing what I do and desire (we will later come back to the importance of desires), a willingness to reconcile, a trusting participation in simple but prepared times of prayer in common, where the Spirit will make us as one².

¹ "We are not the first to seek for clarity regarding God's call. The meeting of the First Companions in Venice is a strong image, an important step in the formation of the Society. On that occasion, the companions faced the frustration of their plans to go to Holy Land. This led them to discern more deeply their call from the Lord. Where the Spirit was leading them? As soon as they understood in their discernment the new direction of their lives, they held fast to what they had already experienced as a source of life: sharing their lives together as friends in the Lord; living very close to the lives of the poor; proclaiming the Gospel with joy." GC 36, Decree 1, no. 4.

² "However, what contributes most to the realization and growth of communion among all members of the Society is an attitude of mind and heart that leads to esteem and accept each of Ours as a brother and a friend in the Lord. In fact, in this case too, "the internal law of charity and love, which the Holy Spirit usually inscribes and imprints in hearts, will serve this purpose more than any other external Constitution." (Constitutions Proemio n. 1)" Complementary Norms n. 313.



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FEATURES

The characteristics, which the Apostolic Plan points out to, are therefore revisited here as stages of a community pilgrimage that reaches ever deeper levels of sharing of being, doing and desiring.

- 1. Sharing on apostolates.** Let us start by our "doing". Sharing about activities we do on a daily basis, which stir our thoughts and guide our efforts, is the beginning of a journey which chooses an alternative to that of a community of "busy" people, who, in fact, ignore each other. If our actions do not also become words offered to others, in a listening context, well prepared and safeguarded by routine, how can we honestly claim that we are journeying from "me" towards becoming "us"? It is not so much a question of knowing what the other does, but of letting the other tell his story in its uniqueness and diversity; it is a question of welcoming him, of offering him a space within us, in our hearts. That a community conquers and safeguards this space of "spoken word", beyond the threshold of pure "doing", is a first step in building an apostolic community.
- 2. Practice of discernment in common.** This level is already more ambitious and supposes the first. It is more ambitious because it goes beyond simply accepting the word of the other; here, it is a question of meeting in a sharing that reaches the level of my motivations, in conscience and in the Lord. We are really at a further stage, which, if pursued with sincerity and consistency, can affect my doing and my feeling, through the alternation of consolations and desolations³. A discernment in common does not necessarily require that we reach who knows which levels of depth, but at the same time it demands that honesty, in involving ourselves, which we can never take for granted. It also demands a minimum of more structured organization of community meetings and, also, a common methodology on which prior agreement must be sought (see the eight points of Father General's Letter on Common Discernment). In short, energies invested are more consistent and, consequently, possible fruits can be expected to be greater. A community that lives with coherence and trust a discernment in common has a far greater apostolic impact, as our charism attests.
- 3. Fraternal life and life in the Spirit.** These two dimensions open the way to a further stage of our pilgrimage, of which, perhaps, they are already destination and road, together. A fraternal life begins when I do not welcome the other for what he does or knows how to do, but for what he is. We are, therefore, on the "sacred land" of gift and gratuity: the evangelical fraternity in fact is never the simple consequence of living or working one next to the other. We are in the heart of friendship in the Lord, which from now on will allow us to share our desires, even beyond the practice of discernment in common that is always a temporary phase. The desires that the Spirit inspires in us are the most precious gifts to preserve and develop the mission of the Society because "those means that unite the instrument with God are more effective than those that dispose it towards men" (Const. 813). Precisely in sharing these desires, which are nourished and shared in the Eucharistic prayer or in other forms of prayer in common, an "affective understanding" comes to life, and not only an operational and pragmatic one; this "affective understanding" can open us up to a wider context, making us receptive to Projects of the Province or of the Universal Society, in order to incarnate them in the community and implement them in the local territory or Church⁴.

³ "The positive tension between discernment in common and apostolic planning requires, in the Ignatian vision, the spiritual *examen* of the experience, in order to continue to grow in fidelity to the will of God." Letter on Discernment in Common from the Apostolic Project EUM 2017-2018, pg. 6.

⁴ Kolvenbach wrote: "The important thing is to live to the full the reality of fraternity as a place of



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The true friend, the friend "in the Lord", makes our authentic freedom grow⁵.

4. **Reconciliation and sharing in depth.** In case of conflict, the community is visited by trial, in the truest biblical sense: it not only suffers divisions, but it also is called to testify, by facing them in an evangelical attitude⁶. Ignoring, denying, evading the challenge means succumbing to it even before facing it. Prayer, especially in the form of intercession, is indeed the first step, considering that every painful division throws the community into the impossibility of finding itself again, if not by receiving itself anew from grace. At times, reciprocal resistances are so deeply rooted that even grace seems not to find a breach to pass through. Yet, between division and reconciliation, there is always something in the order of a miracle. This miracle can only be asked for, by preparing ourselves in humility and in the attitude of "beggars", at times with the help of external people who can accompany these moments, until, one day, a new word of forgiveness, a silence of renewed understanding or unconditional acceptance may germinate.

GOOD PRACTICES

To avoid this description of characteristics remaining too vague, we suggest here some good practices that experience has shown to be effective in initiating community pilgrimages:

1. Bible sharing, especially in the form of Lectio divina
2. Eucharistic liturgies in an attitude of sharing and reciprocal listening
3. Community meetings where apostolic experiences of some members can be listened to (see outline 4, next paragraph)
4. Times when we can get together gratuitely
5. Sharings on topics that are important for some of the community members
6. Annual spiritual exercises together
7. Monthly recollection days
8. Practice of discernment concerning community lifestyle, apostolic commitments, community project
9. Meetings where each one shares about his vocation and important stages in his life in the Society

profound communication, of "manifestation of deep desires and needs, of reflection and prayer: a community in which, as a result of personal and spiritual communication, the responsibility of one towards the other and mutual help grow, in order to discover the will of God through the signs of the times...". Document on Ongoing Formation.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in the poem "The Friend": "Not orders, not coercive, extraneous laws and doctrines, but the good, serious advice that makes free, seeks the mature man, from the fidelity of the friend. Far away or close, in happiness or unhappiness, one recognizes in the other the one who faithfully helps to be free and to be a man."

⁶ Saint Ignatius writes: "No passion or anger against one another can, in any way, be tolerated among those who are in the home. And if something like this were to happen, a prompt reconciliation must be sought for along with an appropriate reparation". Constitutions n° 275.



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Outlines for community meetings

Finally, outlines for community meetings or for days of recollection, are here suggested:

Outline 1. Community *Examen*: adapted from SE 43

Description of steps	timing	note
A community member, here called "guide" for convenience, briefly outlines the examination of conscience according to the SE, possibly giving some examples from his own spiritual experience. Then, the guide takes charge of guiding this community <i>Examen</i> by explaining and introducing the following points and then leaving the necessary times of silence.	5'	
The guide introduces the first <i>Examen</i> point: that is, a personal review of the gifts that, as a community, we have received in the last period (month or year).	5'	Some examples: guests welcomed, meetings, fruitful apostolic experiences, community atmosphere, etc.
The following step is to share each one's review.	10'	Please note: active listening is in itself a great exercise in building up an apostolic body.
We ask for the grace to look at our sins and miseries.	5'	It is certainly a more sensitive point, but it is also the "secret" for living a dynamic of great renewal. It is important here to remember the difference between moral-judgmental evaluation and self-surrendering to healing and reconciling grace.
Once again, the fruit of each one's personal review is shared.	10'	
The grace to find a resolution and a commitment to amend and improve our community life is asked for. Each member seeks for a resolution that, in the light of the Lord, seems appropriate to him.	5'	The commitment should be simple, daily, and possible to be verified.
The <i>Examen</i> ends with the Our Father		



Outline 2: Prayer on vices and virtues from the First Way of Prayer, adapted from SE 244

Description of steps	timing	note
The guide reformulates and adapts the preparatory prayer of SE 46.	3'	This step helps to re-focus the reason for our meeting, to re-focus our person and our action on the service of the Lord who has called us to collaborate with Him in the "least Society".
Some virtues are chosen, perhaps, in particular, from the letters of the Father General, from the documents of the General Congregations, without neglecting the classical ones: in particular humility and charity.	5'	The exercise is like being in front of a mirror, in order to focus on the existence of a certain virtue in our community and rediscover gratitude for the dynamic it brings to our lives.
The following step is to share each one's review.	10'	
Each one goes back to a personal review, this time considering the vices or weaknesses of our community or apostolic life, putting them in relation to the virtues that are the opposite	5'	It is important here to consider the tension, concerning life, between the virtues (which bring life, dynamism, openness, acceptance, newness) and vice (which leads to withdrawing to oneself, aridity, banality, indifference, monotony, inconsistency) in order to set back on a path of renewed life.
A sharing of each one's review follows, paying attention to any proposal or commitment emerging to "amend" or reform community life.	10'	

Outline 3. Sharing on the Word of God (Lumko Method)

Lumko method originated in South Africa as a method suggested for small Christian communities, i.e. for small "neighborhood" communities, which did not have a priest but faced common and daily problems and challenges.

It consists of 7 steps:

Description of steps	timing
A prayer of invocation to the Lord introduces the meeting	3'
A passage from the Gospel is read, without commenting on it, but, if possible, reading it in different versions or languages.	5'
Words or verses that have struck the different participants are spontaneously and loudly re-read, allowing a time of silence after each one's contribution.	10'
A time of silence follows, in order to allow the Lord to speak in each participant.	5'
What has been heard resounding in each one's heart is shared	10'
In a second round, what has touched of the sharings of the others, is expressed.	
A time is left for spontaneous prayers	5'



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Outline 4. Spiritual review of an apostolic experience, followed by echoes

Description of steps	timing
Each participant chooses an apostolic experience he is willing to share.	5'
Each one tells about his own, very synthetically.	10'
The community chooses, by majority vote, the one it wants to hear.	5'
The person concerned by the chosen apostolic experience tells more in detail "the story" and the personal feelings that accompanied it, trying, if possible, to articulate it in significant moments, stages or life bringing dynamics.	15'
The community expresses a round of reactions and echoes, highlighting what struck and what kind of thoughts and motions were aroused.	20'
The person can respond to any of these echoes.	5'
A common prayer of thanksgiving concludes the meeting.	3'

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