

First Rule: “Union of Hearts and Mutual Charity”

Constitution and Statutes of the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer Chapter 2, Part 1

“I have been pleased to choose this Institute, so that it may be a living memory ... of my Only-begotten... To you, beloved souls, I have given these laws of love... Hence you, souls chosen for this enterprise ... will be on earth the living image of my holy Only-begotten.”

*“The Design of the Father”, Primitive Rule of Maria Celeste Crostarosa,
Provisional English translation, 1994*

“Note well...that it is not contemplation which vivifies your life but rather the Viva Memoria, the transformation in Christ - charity.”

*Father Sabatino M. Majorano, CSsR
Conferences on the New Constitution and Statutes, Scala, 1985*

The Rule of the Institute as Revealed to Maria Celeste Crostarosa

The original rule for a new religious enterprise as received by Maria Celeste leaves little room for doubt concerning the institutional reason for being. It describes a community with love as its *raison d’etre*; the interactions of its members so conformed to Jesus’ last supper commandment “love one another as I have loved you” that individual members, as well as the corporate entity they form, will be readily recognized as living memories of Jesus. The specific reason for being is not attainment of pontifical rank; is not monastic enclosure; is not a life ordered to contemplation. The Father gave to Celeste a clear commission for the institute to be in this world, among all people, and particularly in relation to each other in community, living exemplars, living witnesses, living demonstration of the ability to act out of the divine spark within and to be as Jesus who was loving, accepting, non-judgmental, aware of human weakness, and in all things merciful. Everything that follows are means to that end.

It may be argued that this emphasis on creating an interpersonal community dynamic which clearly demonstrates behaviors reflecting the commandment of love after the model of Jesus, places the Redemptoristine Rule within the tradition of the ancient Rule of St. Augustine. In this rule first place is given to “fraternal relationships, insisting on a life lived in community, and on the communion of persons according to the ideal outlined in the Acts of the Apostles 2:44: ‘All believers lived together and had everything in common’, and 4:32: ‘The group of believers had a single heart and soul...’ portraying a horizontal cenobitism.” (*Bresard, Luc. A History of Monastic Spirituality. Citeaux, 2004. <http://scourmont.be/studium/bresard/or-rules.html>*) Augustine’s rule (c. 400 AD) begins:

Before all else, dear brothers, love God and then your neighbor, because these are the chief commandments given to us. The following are the precepts we order you, living in the monastery, to observe. The main purpose for you having come together is to live harmoniously in your house, intent upon God in oneness of mind and heart.

To this ancient emphasis on oneness of mind and heart, the revelation of God to Celeste added a reason, a purpose for this quality of communal life. It was God’s desire that the manner in which the members related to one another would be a living demonstration of the quality of his love for each person. Any good teacher seeks visual aids for verbal instruction. It is not enough that we speak our values. Visual and experiential examples are necessary. St. Alphonsus de Liguori once said that if people claim they cannot love Jesus it is only because they have never really known Him. It is as if this institutional idea emerged from a need for visual aids, living witnesses, living examples, of who God is and, most importantly, what God’s love looks like. It is not enough to proclaim the Gospel injunction in words; “You must forgive seventy times seven.” The possibility of such forgiveness in the human heart takes on a real life when demonstrated in relationships between real people, in real communities, in the real

world. To be a living witness, to be a living memory of Jesus, is to most effectively preach the Gospel without using words.

The commission is most abundantly clear in the section of the Primitive Rule entitled “Idea of the Institute and Rules of the Most Holy Savior”. “Thus I will that whoever sees you on earth, will mention me in the Institute, and I will that it be a memory of the works done by me during my life.” The last paragraph includes: “There will not be among them any distinction of honor... all will be one soul and heart among themselves, because that is how I love in perfect charity... Your life will be lived in perfect unity and charity, and simplicity of spirit in all things, just as I lived mine.”

The current Constitutions and Statutes of the Order follow the emphasis on charity and unity as the first of the nine rules of life presented to Maria Celeste. The position of this rule at the head of the list is another arrow pointing to the *raison d’etre* of the institute. If the divine requirement of the institute is that the quality of relationship and behavior among its members mirrors the attitude of Jesus, then mutual charity and union of hearts must be the ultimate rule. In the Primitive Rule Jesus does not merely direct, “Love one another, as I have loved you.” It is followed by a most touchingly human description of how the nuns of the institute are to live out their commission.

Therefore you will give your neighbors all of your soul. Use your mind to raise them up to my mercy for their benefit, and never judge them of evil in any way. You will give them your memory by pardoning them from your heart, and by completely forgetting any offence received from them, but by remembering it in order to repay them with temporal and spiritual benefits.

You will give them your will by loving them unreservedly, treating them as you would wish others to treat you, wishing them all the good that is possible. You will give them your heart with its affections for my love, sympathizing with their afflictions of corporal or spiritual infirmity.

Employ your body and your senses for their benefit: your eyes

that you never see their defects and actions, but to watch for their needs and come to their relief; your ears to listen to their troubles; your mouth and tongue to defend them modestly and to console them in their afflictions and to instruct them in eternal truths when they are ignorant; and your body and your life should be ready even to be sacrificed, if necessary for their eternal salvation, so that just as I have done, you also should do.

This inspired rule lists eight additional virtues through which the goal of charity and unity modeled on Jesus will be attained. These virtues: poverty, purity, obedience, humility, mortification, recollection and silence, prayer (in order of their presentation) are the means which foster in the corporate community as well as its individual members the interior transformation required for the apostolic job description that is *viva memoria*. Only this interior transformation will enable the growth in charity necessary for bearing witness to the life and love of Jesus Christ; the growth in charity which becoming “living memory” in the community, the Church and the world makes necessary.

Constitution and Statutes of the Order Approved 1985

It is a very worthwhile enterprise to compare the various rules of the Order particularly as they interpret the commission received by Maria Celeste. The Rule of the Order approved in 1934 does not include the introductory material present in the Primitive Rule. However this section, commonly referred to as “The Intent of the Father”, is present in the current rule. In concert with additional articles, it provides the theological underpinning of the Order’s reason for being. Article 5 states:

It was the will of the Father that the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer should have a specific role in His Church: to be a clear and radiant witness of the love He has for us in Christ. It is through Him, in fact, that we have known and received this love which is directed towards all but in a very special way towards the poorest. In order that our brothers and sisters may be fully aware of the love by which

they are eternally loved by Him, the Father calls us today to be a living memorial - a Viva Memoria - a constant reminder - of all that the Son accomplished for our salvation during His life on earth...

A provisional rule of the Order approved in 1975 presented one stage of effort made to re-capture the original inspirations of Maria Celeste. "We are called to contemplate God the Father as He manifests Himself in Christ the Redeemer and to continue in our lives the mission He received from His Father for the salvation of the world." (Art.2.5) "The end she [Maria Celeste] proposed to her Sisters was mystical identification with Christ the Redeemer: recollection in Him, union with Him, such that through the power of the Holy Spirit they will participate in His work and be transformed into Him." (Art.2.6) Interior transformation in Christ is emphasized throughout this rule. However, this document has little to suggest an outward thrust or observable manifestation of this transformation in the soul. The common life, practice of the virtues, and the contemplative stance are emphasized because they are the means to the transformational purpose of the life. Yet there is no mention of the inspired purpose of the institute, the "witness" dimension which requires that the "living memory" of Jesus be made present in community and observable to others. The connection between interior transformation and fulfilling the desire of God for an institute in which a communal life of charity would be observable was yet to be made.

The First Rule: Union of Hearts and Mutual Charity 1985

In 1985, Father Sabatino M. Majorano, CSsR, presented a series of conferences to three Italian Redemptoristine communities at Scala offering commentary on the newly approved Constitution and Statutes of the Order. Father Majorano's notes, translated into English by Father Joseph Oppitz, CSsR, continue to be, second only to his doctoral

thesis, a most valuable resource for understanding of Maria Celeste's original inspiration and purpose of the institute. Father Majorano's enthusiasm for the new rule is obvious. Repeatedly emphasized is the new document's re-appropriation of the core of the inspired rule which is to be living witnesses, living memories of the love of Jesus and God the Father. Attention is often drawn to the practical implications of such a commission; one that makes the Christ-like quality of our inter-personal relationships in community and our relationship with the Church and larger world the very end, the very purpose of Redemptoristine life. He wrote, "The whole vocation demands a communitarian concretization of the Salvific Plan of the Father." (Notes: end of Chapter 1) Thus the community is to be a microcosm of evangelical life. He points out that in approving this text the Holy See endorsed for the first time the original inspiration of Maria Celeste and declared to the Order, "You are the Viva Memoria of the Redeemer." Intro. P. iv)

Chapter 2 of the 1985 Constitution and Statutes bears the title "Our Response to the Intent of the Father: We Follow the Path of the Redeemer". After four introductory articles (14 to 17) the first rule appears under the title "Union of Hearts and Mutual Charity".

'This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you.' Jn 15:12

18. Charity for us is a participation in the infinite love which, from all eternity, unites the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is the love of Christ for His Father and for humankind, a love which impelled Him to give his life for His friends and even for his enemies.

In this love, the Father and we are in communion not only with those who are close to us but with the whole of humanity redeemed by Christ.

It is right for the members of the Mystical Body to be united to their Head without discord or disunity. It is fitting for us who must be transformed in Him throughout our lives to act as He did in His most holy life.

19. The perfection of charity is to fulfill the will of the Father: Such was the food of Jesus. This must also be our nourishment so that we may say with 'Christ: 'I always do what pleases Him.'

20. Love for others is inseparable from the love of God. We must live this in community modeled on the primitive Church of Jerusalem.

21. Mutual charity, lived according to the spirit of our community, has as its fruit, that gift of the Holy Spirit, paschal joy. It is in radiating this joy among ourselves and around us that we give witness to the Risen Christ.

Implications

Is intellectual understanding of the purpose of the Order as that of being a living memory of Jesus at all levels and recognition of the superior position of "Union of Hearts and Mutual Charity" in the primitive and current rules of the Order sufficient foundation for living out the Redemptoristine life? Indications are that Father Majorano would caution otherwise. The zealous reader looks at the entire document to glean deeper understanding of what it means to live out the call to be a "Living Memory" of Jesus in the social ambient of community life. The very text of the current Rule, its Constitutions elaborated upon by the Statutes, offer evidence to support the additional necessity with regard to community life of consciously moving into the realm of the highly intuitive empathetic awareness of human social interaction as realistically described in the opening paragraphs of the primitive rule previously quoted here.

Chapter 3 of the Constitutions, "The Life of Charity in Community" (Chapter 3, 1.60-72) characterizes the community as a family bound by Gospel friendship. It defines community life as "essentially a life in relationship".

It must contribute to the development of the human person, foster relationships and establish a true unity of heart and spirit. It presupposes that each holds the others in esteem, and is able to recognize their value and appreciate their qualities.

Building on a point included in the provisional rule of 1975, these articles promote dialogue at all levels extending to all community acts including meetings, recreation, and work in an atmosphere of simplicity, confidence and friendship. “Thus we must live in perfect unity, charity and simplicity of spirit in everything, as Christ lived with his own.” (Chapter 3, 1.62)

It is this very emphasis on the life of charity in community that Father Majorano underscores with the injunction: “Note well...that it is not contemplation which vivifies your life, but rather the Viva Memoria, the transformation in Christ - charity.” The list of virtues which follow the call for communal charity in the Rule are means to the end, the Redemptoristine end, which is to be a “living memory” of Jesus Christ. With this understanding the spotlight shifts to the scene of our commitment to “*viva memoria*”. The scene is set on the communal stage. Community life; its relationships, manner of communication, cultivation of friendships, awareness of joys and sorrows, empathetic attitude; these become the benchmarks of our charism. The character and quality of community life should be what marks us as Redemptoristines, the attributes with which the Order is associated, such that it may be said, “See how they love one another.”

Relationships will not be forged in a passive atmosphere. The requirements called for in our Constitution and Statutes surpass the realm of merely reactive. They call for a proactive stance. The voice of God directs in the Primitive Rule,

Employ your body and your senses for their benefit: your eyes that you never see their defects and actions, but to watch for their needs and come to their relief; your ears to listen to their troubles your mouth and tongue to defend them modestly and console them in their afflictions...

There are challenges here for every personality type. In those for whom silence and recollection naturally provide a comfort zone, moving from reactive to proactive in the social milieu of community may be a truly demanding but valuable and transformative ascetic practice. For those more naturally outgoing, the asceticism of observing boundaries, of giving individuals their space, may be a great challenge, a version of acquired humility on the way to becoming “living memory”. In any case, the virtues of community life presented in our rule of life call for radical availability for collaboration, communication, friendship, empathy and service to mention just a few qualities necessary for meaningful inter-personal relationship.

These are the very challenges presented by Redemptorist priest Dennis Billy in his book “Living in the Gap - Religious Life and the Call to Communion” (New City Press, 2011). Father Billy cites sections of the Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II “Vita Consecrata” which may be applied directly to consideration of how Redemptoristines may interpret their charism today.

Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practice the spirituality of communion as “witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God’s design.” (Documents of the Second Vatican Council) The life of communion, in fact, “becomes a sign for the world and a compelling force that leads people to faith in Christ...In this way communion leads to mission, and itself becomes mission...” (Vita Consecrata, 46)

The Church entrusts to communities of consecrated life the particular task of spreading the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal life and then in the ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries, by opening or continuing dialogue in charity, especially where today’s world is torn apart by ethnic hatred or senseless violence. (Vita Consecrata, 51)

Father Billy acknowledges that the spirituality of communion, other words for what Redemptoristines may call a *viva memoria* spirituality, will never be perfectly lived

out in this world. There is a gap between the ideal and lived experience. For him, “the key question is not whether the gap between the vision and the experience exists in the lives of religious men and woman, but whether they recognize it and assume responsibility for making it smaller and smaller.” (p.14) Attention is drawn to the following features of community and attitudes toward them as potential gauges of the width of the gap: vision, structures, interaction, individuality, personality, motivation, involvement, awareness and loneliness.

Speaking of the history, theology and interpretation of the Redemptoristine charism must bring us to honest personal and communal examination of the “gap” as it exists in hearts and in relationships. Good teachers often tell students, “Effort counts.” May the effort we make in this regard close the gap between persons, between the communities of our Order, and contribute to the narrowing of all gaps in human understanding and compassion so that as women of the Church we may more closely follow its directive to be “a *Viva Memoria* of the Redeemer.”



God, what love-mischief can ‘We’ do for the world today?”

from The Seed Cracked Open by Hafiz

Questions for Reflection (Adapted from “Living in the Gap”, Dennis Billy)

1. How would Maria Celeste see our Order today? Would she be happy with it or saddened by it? What concrete changes would she seek? What would she do different today from the time of the Order's founding? What would you do to implement her vision more effectively today at the individual, local and international levels? Does it relate in any way to the need for developing an authentic language of conversation? If so, how?
2. What are the unique challenges involved in living out Rule 1 - Union of Hearts and Mutual Charity? Which of these do you find most difficult? Are there any that you find easy? In what sense does communion beget communion? Why must the dialogue of communion begin from within and work itself outward? What concrete steps can you take to encourage the living of a spirituality of 'union of hearts and mutual charity' in your own community?
3. Besides poverty, chastity, obedience what other virtues are important for life in a religious community. Why are they important? What values do they underscore? How can they be encouraged? Are there any particular structures that can promote them? Are there any virtues vital for a living reality of our charism? What makes our community distinctive? Can you think of any specific structures your community might adopt that might highlight its distinctiveness?
4. Why is perseverance so important for a person's call in life? How does it relate to the virtue of courage? Why is it so important for life in community? Has your community ever discussed the need for perseverance in the various aspects of its communal life? What concrete step can you take to emphasize its importance?

