

2018 -2021 National Priority
Fraternity Life
Fraternity as Family
By Mary Bittner, OFS

Becoming a Christian means that we are a part of a new people — where I am theirs and they are mine. The biblical category for this is family. Immediately after Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to the father, the earliest Christians started referring to each other as *brother* or *sister*. This became more profoundly difficult when they came to realize that Gentiles and Samaritans were now brother and sister as well. Foreigners were now their closest relations.

The temptation here is two-fold. Either we will allow the terms *brother* and *sister* to become meaningless, or we will cease to be a family at all and become something else. These temptations have come to pass for many of us. When we lose the deep meaning of *brother* and *sister*, and when we give up on the church as a family, we simply become a group. When this happens, we cease to be a family of God with Christ at its center and instead become a group with issues at its heart. — Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel, *The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb*, p. 118 (2017)

The good of any Christian group is not always found in the eradication of all faults and mistakes and the establishment of correct order in everything. It is found in the growth of love and understanding among weak, frail, mistaken people (Finbarr Connolly, C.Ss.R., *God and Man in Modern Spirituality*, p. 99, 1984).

There used to be an expression in popular spiritual literature: *Families and communities are schools of charity*. I remember reading it as a novice many years ago, and very naively and very badly misunderstanding it. My simple thought then was, *Yes, that makes sense! When you live within a family or some other community, it gives you a lot of chances to practice patience, forgiveness, and understanding — as you deal with other people's faults!* How wrong I was! What that expression suggests is not, first of all, that we grow in charity and maturity by putting up patiently with other people's faults, but that real relationship, actual interaction within family and community, deflates our fantasies, makes us see reality, punctures our self-centeredness, and, against every protest, denial, and rationalization we can muster, shows us how selfish and immature we often are.

We cannot live very long within any community — marriage, family, religious community, or genuine friendship — without becoming aware of our faults and narrowness. We either begin to grow up, or we leave. Sadly, the temptation is most often to leave (Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, *Our One Great Act of Fidelity*, pp. 114-5, 2010).

Questions for discussion:

1. Reflect on the above quotes in the light of your fraternity. In your experience, does the fraternity “deflate our fantasies, make us see reality,” and so on? Or do we have so little contact with each other that everyone can keep wearing their rose-colored glasses? Do we feel a need to “eradicate all faults and mistakes,” even if that means treating people uncharitably? Or, conversely, do we turn a blind eye to some real difficulties rather than acknowledge and deal with them? What happens then?
2. How do we bring love into a divisive situation in fraternity? Share some examples from your own experience of fraternity, where this happened — or didn't.
3. Carla Candidate is in formation with your fraternity. She's just come to you, saying “The people in this fraternity are all hypocrites. They say we are brothers and sisters, but they don't act like it.” She's very upset and thinking of dropping out of formation. What would you tell her?
4. Why is commitment so important in the life of a fraternity? How can we foster it? What happens when people are not committed?
5. Candidates Cathy and Conrad understand that commitment to fraternity is important, but they're wondering how to balance commitment to fraternity, to their family, and to each other. What advice can you give them?

This article was originally published in the TAU-USA, Issue #99, page 25.