

# Fraternity in the Christian Tradition

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*Koinonia as an interpretive hermeneutic*

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## Introduction

Dr. Cirelli, Reverend and Venerable colleagues, my brothers and sisters in dialogue.

I am pleased to have the opportunity, along with Father William Skudlarek, to offer a brief approach to the Christian understanding of fraternity as we move into the next dimension of our theme: “Fraternity as the Way Forward.” At the outset, I am quite happy with this title, since the original name by which the disciples of Jesus were known was “The Way.”<sup>1</sup> My approach will be to first look at a biblical text whose interpretation will form the basis for my proposal for a Christian understanding of fraternity. This particular text, Acts 2:42, also describes the fraternal experience in the Church immediately after its full manifestation at Pentecost.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the Christian church or ecclesial community you might encounter, this biblical approach

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 9:2

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:42. When I speak of the Church in this paper, I am focusing on its theological nature which can most simply be expressed as extending the Incarnation through time and across the Earth. The Church, in this usage, is the place of the continued presence of Christ in the world through the ministry of word, sacrament and community. This verse of the New Testament captures the essential aspects of faith, sacramental life and ecclesiastical governance which make the Church the complex reality she is.

should be universal, by which I mean that not only Catholics but all Christians should recognize their own teaching in my interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

Next, I want to relate the text to the central doctrine of our religion, the Holy Trinity.<sup>4</sup> This theological treatment of the ground of being, as Christians express it, reveals how the relationship of persons is central to anything we might say about fraternity. To do this, I'm going to use some material from Eastern Christianity, both to show theological diversity, as Father Alexei showed us liturgical diversity, because Pope Francis has indicated that the theologian I will quote, Saint Gregory of Narek, is one from whom we can learn sound theology, especially at this time.<sup>5</sup> Finally, I want to attempt to apply the biblical text and theology to interreligious dialogue, especially as seen in the writings of Pope Paul VI and the present Holy Father, Francis.<sup>6</sup> Paul VI defined dialogue as the way the Church would engage the modern world.<sup>7</sup> I think dialogue is a notion which we need to recover in a new way in the twenty-first century. Along the way I will teach you at least one Greek word and its Latin equivalent.

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<sup>3</sup> By the phrase "church or ecclesial community" I am referring to those Christian communities not in full communion with the Catholic Church. These include the Orthodox churches and the communities of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation. In terms of taxonomy, you could classify all Christians as divided into five groups: The Catholic Church, the Orthodox churches, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal.

<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter CCC), 232-248.

<sup>5</sup> Saint Gregory of Narek, an 8<sup>th</sup> century Armenian monk, was declared doctor of the Church by Pope Francis in February 2015.

<sup>6</sup> See Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam: The Encyclical Letter on the Paths of the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, and Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel* (Washington, DC: USCCB Press, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> *Ecclesiam Suam*, *Ibid.*

## Acts 2:42

As a general statement, Christianity could be understood as the Way of overcoming the division between God and humankind. It is liberation from exile.<sup>8</sup> It is a teaching of unity rooted in the very Christian conception of God as a Trinity of person united in love.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, when we think of the Way, which is another name for the Church, we conceive the goal as the realization of the Kingdom of God which is nothing other than the unity of all creation with Jesus, the *Logos*, who called creation into being.<sup>10</sup>

In the Bible, there is a vision of what the Kingdom of God looks like. It could be described as a fellowship which has overcome the “relational causes of suffering” which we explored on our first two days of dialogue.

Let me begin by reading the text from the Acts of the Apostles:

So those who received [Peter’s] word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’

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<sup>8</sup> The theme of exile is dominant in the Bible and usually associated with suffering and captivity. Salvation on the human level is liberation from physical captivity. Spiritually, it is liberation from the things which disrupt our relationship with God, ourselves and our neighbor. Paul VI in *Ecclesiam Suam* no. 70 writes: “Here, then, Venerable Brethren, is the noble origin of this dialogue: in the mind of God Himself. Religion of its very nature is a certain relationship between God and man. It finds its expression in prayer; and prayer is a dialogue. Revelation, too, that supernatural link which God has established with man, can likewise be looked upon as a dialogue. In the Incarnation and in the Gospel it is God's Word that speaks to us. That fatherly, sacred dialogue between God and man, broken off at the time of Adam's unhappy fall, has since, in the course of history, been restored. Indeed, the whole history of man's salvation is one long, varied dialogue, which marvelously begins with God and which He prolongs with men in so many different ways.”

<sup>9</sup> CCC 214-219.

<sup>10</sup> See John 1. See also CCC 280. “Creation is the foundation of ‘all God’s saving plans,’ the ‘beginning of the history of salvation’ that culminates in Christ. Conversely, the mystery of Christ casts conclusive light on the mystery of creation and reveals the end for which ‘in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth:’ from the beginning, god envisaged the glory of the new creation in Christ.”

teaching and *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.<sup>11</sup>

Now, I have highlighted the word fellowship in my text because that's the term I want to focus upon. In Greek, the original language in which Luke wrote to Theophilus, the word, *κοινωνία*, is most often translated as "fellowship." Actually, it would be better translated as "participation." In this context, it has the sense of "the share which one has in anything."<sup>12</sup> In secular terms, the idea is that you have invested in something and have an equity share. Rendered in Latin, the word is *communio*, which has become a technical term in 20<sup>th</sup> century theology, referring both to the inner life of the Trinity and the inner life of the Church. Baptism gives the individual the sacramental participation in the divine life. This life is nourished and sustained by word and

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<sup>11</sup> Acts 2:42-47. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles was part of a two-book series written by Luke. It was written, along with his Gospel, for a Roman official named Theophilus. It is a structured narrative which, across the two works, presents the person and work of Jesus and the continuation of Jesus' presence and action in, and through the Church. As Theophilus was a non-Jew, Luke-Acts is as sustained presentation of Christianity to non-Christians, by which I mean the sacred author intentionally tries to relate Jesus to all the nations (the Gentiles) and does not presume knowledge of the Old Testament or Judaism in the way that other evangelists do.

<sup>12</sup> See Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3, (Grand Rapids, MI: W. M. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1967), 797,447. See also James D. Strong, *The Exhaustive concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), G-2842.

sacrament in the Church by the baptized devoting themselves to the teaching of the Apostles (doctrine) to the *koinonia*, to the breaking of the bread [likely meaning both the *agape* (fellowship meal) and the Eucharist] and to the prayers, which likely here means intercessory prayer for the needs of the fellowship.<sup>13</sup> Part of the life in the fellowship was a notion of the universal destination of private property.<sup>14</sup> This would be part of the participation which better defines fellowship.

### *Koinonia* as a reflection of the Trinity

This participation of persons in a communion of love is closely related to Christian notions of the Godhead. The two central doctrines are the Trinity of three Persons in one God and the incarnation of the Son, the divine Logos, in Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>15</sup> The unity of the two natures, divine and human, in Jesus, is the bridge which overcomes any duality between God and humankind. To explore this for a moment, I want to quote Dr. Sergio La Porta, an expert on Saint Gregory of Narek, who was just declared a doctor of the church by Pope Francis. Dr. La Porta writes:

The Trinitarian image of God in man according to [Saint Gregory of Narek] is quite different from that espoused by [Saint] Augustine. The Latin theologian looks within man to understand God, employing analogies drawn especially from the human soul and its faculties, to help explain the unity and distinctions

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<sup>13</sup> See Richard J. Dillon and Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, S.J., "Acts of the Apostles" in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 176.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Dillon and Fitzmeyer equate "shared goods" with "*koinonia*" as a way of expressing "the ideal facets of the first community's life."

<sup>15</sup> See CCC 456-463.

in the Trinity. By contrast, [Saint Gregory] turns to the divine to discover what truly lies within himself.<sup>16</sup>

In terms of ecumenical relations, our relationship with God is never separated from our relationship with all of those who are baptized into Christ. For Saint Gregory, the doctrine reveals our real nature, men and women, made in the image of God, and, here is the point, the image of a God who is a unity of persons. We are not properly understanding being “made in the image of God” if we think of ourselves solely as individuals. We must instead think of ourselves as individuals in non-competitive relationships. By extension, then, our relational fellowship does not end only with the baptized. For Christ assumed a human nature, and therefore united himself with all humanity. Our unity with Christ by baptism also puts us into an extended relationship with other believers, the practitioners of other religions, and even with those who do not believe or who intentionally reject belief. By virtue of our common humanity, we have the capacity for human communion with all peoples.<sup>17</sup>

If the image of God is to be in non-competitive relationship, then living solely as individuals is the definition of exile. Only when we live, and live well in relationships, are we revealing and experiencing our true nature as the image of God. This means, for example, that being a family is not a set of tasks to accomplish each week, but a complete way of life. It also means that the church is not first of all an institution, but a community in relationship with Christ, which brings us into relationship with the

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<sup>16</sup> Sergio La Porta, “God and the Trinity,” in *Saint Grégoire de Narek Théologien et Mystique--Orientalia Christiana Analects*, no. 275 (2006), 93. Dr. La Porta is the Haig and Isabel Berberian Professor of Armenian Studies at California State University, Fresno.

<sup>17</sup> See *Ecclesiam Suam*, op. cit.

Trinity.<sup>18</sup> Being a member of the Church is to leave the exile of the individualism and competition of the secular world and enter into the unity of Christianity, of those who practice religion and those who share our common humanity.

## *Koinonia* as a framework for Interreligious Dialogue

In this way, *koinonia* becomes the framework for interreligious dialogue.

Fraternity is, as Pope Francis said in his Message on the World Day of Peace “. . . an essential human quality, for we are all relational beings. . . . without fraternity, it is impossible to build a just society and a solid and lasting peace.”<sup>19</sup> Pope Paul VI defined dialogue as the means of engagement with all of humanity.<sup>20</sup> Pope Francis describes

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<sup>18</sup> See CCC 795.

<sup>19</sup> Francis, “Message for the World Day of Peace 2014, no. 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ecclesiam Suam* no. 81-82, “Dialogue, therefore, is a recognized method of the apostolate. It is a way of making spiritual contact. It should however have the following characteristics: 1) Clarity before all else; the dialogue demands that what is said should be intelligible. We can think of it as a kind of thought transfusion. It is an invitation to the exercise and development of the highest spiritual and mental powers a man possesses. This fact alone would suffice to make such dialogue rank among the greatest manifestations of human activity and culture. In order to satisfy this first requirement, all of us who feel the spur of the apostolate should examine closely the kind of speech we use. Is it easy to understand? Can it be grasped by ordinary people? Is it current idiom? 2) Our dialogue must be accompanied by that meekness which Christ bade us learn from Himself: “Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart.” (56) It would indeed be a disgrace if our dialogue were marked by arrogance, the use of bared words or offensive bitterness. What gives it its authority is the fact that it affirms the truth, shares with others the gifts of charity, is itself an example of virtue, avoids peremptory language, makes no demands. It is peaceful, has no use for extreme methods, is patient under contradiction and inclines towards generosity. 3) Confidence is also necessary; confidence not only in the power of one's own words, but also in the good will of both parties to the dialogue. Hence dialogue promotes intimacy and friendship on both sides. It unites them in a mutual adherence to the Good, and thus excludes all self-seeking. 4) Finally, the prudence of a teacher who is most careful to make allowances for the psychological and moral circumstances of his hearer, (57) particularly if he is a child, unprepared, suspicious or hostile. The person who speaks is always at pains to learn the sensitivities of his audience, and if reason demands it, he adapts himself and the manner of his presentation to the susceptibilities and the degree of intelligence of his hearers. In a dialogue conducted with this kind of foresight, truth is wedded to charity and understanding to love.

dialogue as a social contribution to peace.<sup>21</sup> What I find particularly important for our task is his notion that “the Church speaks from the light which faith offers, contributing her two thousand years of experience and keeping ever in mind the life and sufferings of human beings.”<sup>22</sup> This could equally apply to Buddhists, who speak in dialogue from the insights of their religious tradition and practice. In fact, I would suggest that this insight locates the motive for interreligious dialogue within each tradition and make the goal an exchange of gifts. Such an exchange overcomes competition for the sake of full human development, the preservation of the common good and the promotion of a culture of human solidarity.

## Conclusion

I said at the outset that my approach would be to begin with the short text from Acts 2:42 which gave us both the language, in the term *koinonia*, and in the image of human relationships described among the new believers needed for an approach to the Christian understanding of fraternity. I would argue that this language and image would be fairly universal among Christians regardless of the church or ecclesial community to which they belong. Next, I related Acts 2:42 to the central doctrine of the Trinity. While we may not agree on the theistic language, my contention is that both Buddhism and Christianity ultimately locate their particular doctrines in their notions about Being. While I am skeptical about the comparative religions approach, which is

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<sup>21</sup> See *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 238.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

always looking for similarities and equalities, I would argue that as particular our two religions are, we are attempting a similar thing in grounding our ideas about fraternity in Being. This is how Pope Paul VI conceived dialogue when he located Buddhism in the circle of believers in God. And Pope Francis' claims in *Evangelii Gaudium* are nothing short of profound in his sense that interreligious dialogue is essential for peace through the solidarity of the human community. Hopefully, we can, by what we do here, contribute to the ultimate goal of harmony which is the condition of the possibility of such a peace. Thank you for your attention.

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