

Communio

In every parish there are some people who have no family or sense of belonging. These people need others to reach out to them. Some people might say “I have enough friends and don’t need a Family Group”. However basic Christianity demands we reach out to others. Jesus did not say, “Love your neighbour unless you already have enough friends”. Everyone has to make an effort. Those who remain in a comfort zone unwilling to reach out to others have to question how much they really understand the gospel call.

One of the aims of the Passionist Family Group Movement is to live and love like the early Christians. The spirituality behind PFG’s reflects the way Jesus lived and exercised his ministry. This spirituality is a response to the call to ‘love one another’, to accept & welcome others, to be prepared to share meals with ‘anyone’ and to reach out to those in need. Jesus’ great passion was to include ‘outsiders’ in community. For Jesus no one should be an outsider whether they be a Samaritan, thief, leper, prostitute, tax collector ritually unclean etc).

The early Christians, striving to live this message were noted for one outstanding characteristic, ‘See how they love one another’. To be labelled in this way, means they must have enjoyed life together. Passionist Family Groups too, should enjoy being together. It is sad to hear some church people say ‘all those Family Group people do is have a good time’. Didn’t Jesus want this when he said “I have come that you may have life and have it to the full”.

Pope John Paul, speaking in France in 1982, said *“I encourage you to have as your aim, the quality of your Christian communities. This undoubtedly is more important than their quantity. People need to find there first of all, a high quality spirit of welcome, thanks to the presence of likeable and competent people whether they be priests, religious or lay people.”*

The early Christian communities took on many different characteristics, because they were located in different towns, cities and cultures. Normally we understand that ‘the early Christians’ were the early Jerusalem community, which comprised essentially Jewish Christians but it included some Gentile converts. Our clearest descriptions of this early community come from the Acts of the Apostles. During the years from which this writing comes Jerusalem experienced extreme famine and hardship. Acts (Chapters 2 & 4) includes phrases such as: *‘the faithful lived together and owned everything in common’, ‘they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed’, ‘none of their members was ever in want, as those who owned houses or land would sell them and bring the money from them to the apostles so it could be distributed to any members who might be in need’ and ‘they shared their food gladly and generously’*

This practical care for one another and common faith marked by ‘love for one another’ has always been regarded as the signature of an ‘ideal Christian community. It was with this in mind that it was included as the first aim of the Passionist Family Groups. A Christian community should be marked then, by an inclusive fellowship that exercises care and concern for one another.

The church today calls its members to *communio* – to a deep inclusive fellowship. A vital component of *communio* is leadership. In gospel life rather than simply volunteer, people are called to ministry. They respond to an invitation! Unless we are attentive to the faith dimension of leadership roles, it is easy to see leadership become purely functional, rather than ministerial. To shepherd the people in a Family Group is a wonderful opportunity to respond to Jesus' invitation to love and care for others. This is a Movement about people, and people need to be loved and nurtured.

We need to discern the need, and consider who might be suitable and then invite or 'call' them to this ministry. Certainly, some will be like the rich young man in the gospel (Mk 10:17-22) who 'walked away sad'. This will happen because people have other priorities or commitments. This may happen less however, if the call to them is made from a faith and mission perspective. In other words, the invitation is very clearly to ministry, not to management. It is to care for people, to help the people love one another more and support one another better. It is not to organize monthly outings. It is to build an inclusive family, to build *communio*.

Passionist Family Group life provides a way to meet new parishioners and get together once a month for activities, but there must be something deeper, namely a commitment to grow in love and fellowship. In this way PFG's contribute to the fundamental principle of *communio*. In 2005 Pope Benedict 16th said *"if on the one hand, knowing the faith is one purpose, on the other, socialising in the Church means being introduced into a great community (of the Church) a living milieu, where I know that even in the important moments of my life, especially in suffering and death, I am not alone."*

Although fellowship is an integral part of parish life, large parishes and an increasing tendency to amalgamate communities under a common pastor, can work against *communio*. Before people can love and support one another, they have to get to know one another, and in many parishes, this doesn't happen easily. Without a concentrated effort to attend to the principle of *communio*, many parishes will diminish or die. Attending Mass (or a liturgy with communion) each Sunday is one part of Christian life. We then have to live what we celebrate.

St John warned 'anyone who does not love his brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen(1 John 4:21). This is a challenge to ensure our Christian living is not just words. Our call is to love others and to see them as other Christs. The search for connectedness, so strong in human beings, and most especially in the younger generations can lead to a desire for *communio*. The PFG's is one way of doing this.

We can reflect on some questions related to *communio*.

1. How does our parish life (our PFG's) at present, express and grow this gift of *communio*?
2. How well do we welcome people to parishes and to our PFG's?
3. How are we of the needs of others and do we respond to these?
4. How do we reach out to other Christians?