THE COMPANY WE KEEP

FIRST READING
ACTS 1:12-14

After Jesus was taken up into heaven the apostles went back from the Mount of Olives, as it is called, to Jerusalem, a short distance away, no more than a sabbath walk; and when they reached the city they went to the upper room where they were staying; there were Peter and John, James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Jude son of James.

All these joined in continuous prayer, together with several women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.
SEPARATION ANXIETY

People are always hanging out with other people. From political parties to religious gatherings, parish ministries, hobby groups, community clubs, voluntary organisations and labour unions, the many different communities we belong to are a reflection of our common interests and concerns. Yet, many people don’t even think about their community involvements until they are separated from them. I felt this simultaneous sense of realisation and loss when I left Singapore to pursue a tertiary education some years ago. The prospect of leaving friends and family behind, starting from scratch and building up new connections in a foreign land was both exhilarating and daunting.

Associating with other people in communities is a natural part of being human. There are many reasons why we do this. One reason is that we simply enjoy the company of other people. When I communicate or collaborate with other people, I share new experiences and gain new insights. At the same time, I learn more about myself, my own strengths and weaknesses, and how to play well with others. Another reason why we associate with other people is that we realise we can’t do it alone. When I come together with others to work towards a common goal, I acknowledge that my individual efforts alone are limited but that these limitations can be overcome when I join my efforts with others.

One example of associating with others as Christians and citizens in Singapore is when I come together with fellow Christians in my neighbourhood to share our faith and lives with each other. It is within this community that we try to discern God’s Word to us as we gradually build up the confidence and the competence to concretely tackle some of the worrying issues that have emerged in our neighbourhood.

LIVING TRADITION

“[Human beings] are by nature social, and consequently they have the right to meet together and to form associations with their fellows. They have the right to confer on such associations the type of organization which they consider best calculated to achieve their objectives. They have also the right to exercise their own initiative and act on their own responsibility within these associations for the attainment of the desired results.”

“…the founding of a great many such intermediate groups or societies for the pursuit of aims which [are] not within the competence of the individual to achieve efficiently, is a matter of great urgency. Such groups and societies must be considered absolutely essential for the safeguarding of man’s personal freedom and dignity, while leaving intact a sense of responsibility.”


Reflect:
What communities are you a member of?

How and why did you come to be involved in these communities?

What common interests or concerns are these communities trying to pursue or address?
THE FAMILY CONNECTION
The freedom and the right to associate with other people is not an exclusively Christian concept but it is catholic in the sense that it is universal. People of all faiths put this principle into practice on a daily basis to work towards the common good.

However, in the light of our faith and tradition, the principle of association takes on greater meaning, for God – the Holy Trinity – is a holy community of persons consisting of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We get a taste of this community – and in a deeper sense, communion – from the moment of our birth. We are born into families that receive us, raise us, and school us in the lessons of life. It is also in our Christian families where we first encounter God and the mysteries of life. From these beginnings, we build up the confidence to eventually step out into the world and contribute to society by associating with other like-minded people.

We catch a glimpse of what it means to be a community in last Sunday’s reading where we hear of the disciples gathering together in the cenacle, the upper room, to pray (Acts 1:12-14).

LIVING TRADITION
“All members of the family, each according to his or her own gift, have the grace and responsibility of guiding day by day the communion of persons, making the family ‘a school of deeper humanity’: This happens where there is care and love for the little ones, the sick, the aged, where there is mutual service every day...”

“The family is the first and fundamental school of social living. As a community of love, it finds in self-giving the law that guides it and makes it grow...”

“...the family is ‘the first and vital cell of society.’ The family has vital and organic links with society since it is its foundation... It is from the family that citizens come to birth and it is within the family that they find the first school of the social virtues... Thus, far from being closed in on itself, the family is by nature and vocation open to other families and to society and undertakes its social role.”

- Pope John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio: The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, paragraphs 21, 37, 42.

The disciples’ response to Jesus’ call to follow him during his life and their associating with one another in common witness after his ascension enabled the Church to take root and grow into what it is today – a universal family of faith and community of believers.

In a very real sense, the Church is grounded upon a Christian appreciation for our desire to associate with other people – we were not created to be alone but to live together, with and for each other (Gen 2:18-25). We grow in knowledge of ourselves, each other, and God in our Christian communities where faith and tradition are handed on through the generations.

Reflect:
How has your family been a ‘school of deeper humanity’ for you or your children?

What is the importance of your family to society?

How does a Christian appreciation for the principle of association affect your other community involvements?
RIGHT AND RESPONSIBILITY

As Christians and citizens in Singapore – as a nation descended from immigrants and housed together on this tiny island – the freedom and the right to associate with other people assumes great significance for us. In certain societies, individuals are not only constrained from joining or forming associations but are also coerced into joining only those associations which are prescribed by the authorities. Here, our freedom and right to associate is protected under the Constitution (although within limitations under the Societies Act). It is with this appreciation that we turn our attention to the rest of society. Perhaps the next step in the process of faithful citizenship is greater participation in associations that are working towards the common good. One path that converges with our Christian responsibility entails recognising and respecting the human dignity of each and every person in society and addressing the concerns of the most vulnerable in our midst – the young, the old, the sick, the poor, the outcast, and the foreigner.

We can begin by coming together with our neighbours in our neighbourhoods to minister to the vulnerable who seek encouragement and empowerment. We could start by introducing ourselves and reaching out to the families living on our floor, block, or street. We could also observe the patterns of life that unfold in our neighbourhood, with particular sensitivity towards the vulnerable who share that space. Together with our neighbours, we could then reflect upon the causes before responding to their situation in a holistic and sustainable way. United by such a task, our exercise of our freedom and right to associate requires no approval or authorisation other than the consent given by our conscience – a conscience informed by faith, committed to public order, and directed towards the common good.

Reflect:
What associations exist in your neighbourhood, community, or society that are directed towards building up the common good – particularly those that care for the most vulnerable in society?

How have you participated in such associations? Why or why not?

What particular considerations are enabling or preventing you from forming or participating in such associations?

LIVING TRADITION

“The consciousness of [our] own weakness urges [us] to call in aid from without...It is this natural impulse which binds [people] together in civil society; and it is likewise this which leads them to join together in associations...”

“...to enter into a ‘society’ of this kind is the natural right of [human beings]; and the State has...to protect natural rights, not to destroy them; and, if it forbid its citizens to form associations, it contradicts the very principle of its own existence...”

“There are occasions...when it is fitting that the law should intervene to prevent certain associations, as when [people] join together for purposes which are evidently bad, unlawful, or dangerous to the State...But every precaution should be taken not to violate the rights of individuals and not to impose unreasonable regulations under pretense of public benefit. For laws only bind when they are in accordance with right reason, and, hence, with the eternal law of God.”