
COMMUNITY: AN EXPERIENCE OF RETURNING

GO, GET INFECTED AND RENEW THE ALLIANCE

by Luigino Bruni

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“Coi vecchi nostri canti che sai, voci di cose piccole e care, t’addormiremo, vecchio; e potrai ricominciare. E quando il mare, nella tua sera, mesto nell’ombra manda il suo grido, sciogliere ancora potrai la nera nave dal lido. Vedrai le terre de’ tuoi ricordi, del tuo patire dolce e remoto”

Giovanni Pascoli, *Il ritorno*

At the heart of each person there is a mystery that is revealed, and only in part, during the whole of life, not infrequently in its last part. Even

people with many talents, even those who are truly brilliant, find themselves in a state of partial and imperfect knowledge of their own "charisma", their untapped potential, their self-deception and past and present illusions. Therefore, when a person encounters a voice that calls them and their life undergoes a radical turn, if they respond and begin to walk they do not and cannot know what the development of that encounter will bring, what its fruits, pains and great surprises will be. In a marriage, in an artistic or religious vocation, the wonderful part is the unknown and infinite potential. We do not know what we will become, what the other we tie ourselves to will become, what our relationship will become. What God will become.

Because in every pact and in every promise the most valuable 'yes' is not the one said to our present and past and those of the other, but the one pronounced, in the now and reciprocally, to their and our future. That's where the beauty and tragedy of these pacts lie. We live with someone who continually reveals themselves to be different from the person we married; we grow up in a community that is gradually moving away from the one we entered. And day by day as we try to get to know and recognize the person next to us, we also strive to reconcile ourselves with the person we are becoming - and whom we often don't like. The crisis of a relationship is a *plural misalignment* of multiple dimensions where we do not know if it is the novelty of the other or our own that we no longer like - often it is both. Many families keep functioning because human beings have a great resilience to change, especially to the fundamental changes of "you", "I" and "we".

In the spiritual and ideal realm, however, we are generally never sufficiently prepared for the experience (that we sometimes know in the abstract, having read about it in a book) that even the God and/or the ideal we have chosen will change,

and it will change a lot, at least as much as we will and, almost always, more than we will. Also for this reason, the ways, the forms and times in which a response to a vocation develops over time are very different from each other, creating a growing diversity.

All organizations have a hard time managing diversity among human beings. Every worker is unique, at any moment they live their own phase in relation to the one that the organization is going through, they cross the many ages of life, suffer traumas and illnesses. However, the organization cannot stay in tune with the life phases of each person, and the show must go on. Theory and practice, however, are showing that various organizational innovations try to *calibrate* employment contracts on the individuals' needs, from young mothers to those who want to earn a degree while working, up to the mature worker who prefers to dedicate more time and energy to their interests and passions, giving up a portion of their salary. Businesses where people live and grow well have understood that workers have different ways of dedicating themselves to the organization, and that the creation of places outside the company where relationships and affectivity can be cultivated improves the overall quality of women and men, producing a more creative and free working environment, too. When, on the other hand, contractual flexibility is low, or when companies use incentives so they don't have to let people free, but capture them with the seduction of money and power, the quality of life worsens inside and outside the company.

In the world of ideal-driven organizations (IDO-s), the management of anthropological peculiarities and the life phases of individual members is even more complex, especially for those people who have a strong, identity-shaping relationship with the institution, as happens in religious communities and spiritual movements (but not only in these). An IDO is much more (and, in other ways, much less) than an enterprise. The type of membership, for example, of a Franciscan brother or a Salesian sister in their own community is way too different from a company employment contract, or from the commitment of a volunteer to an association. Personalized contracts do not apply here, nor do incentives increase their "productivity". This discourse is valid not only in the case of people entirely *consecrated* for a cause, but whenever the membership in a community or movement is, essentially, a matter of *vocation* - because, let us not forget, a vocation is a universal anthropological experience, covering a much wider area than just the religious sphere.

In these cases, belonging to an IDO almost inevitably tends to become an *exclusive* kind of belonging, by the choice of the person and the institution. And that's where the more passionate reasoning begins.

A Benedictine brother alternates prayer with work, but when he stops working he doesn't really "leave" work to return "home". His return to the community is not like that of Francesca, mother of a family, who also leaves the office to return home. They are two substantially different "houses", because while Francesca passes from one sphere of her life (the enterprise) to another (family), governed by distinct principles and sometimes in tension with each other, Father Bernardino actually remains in the same identity-forming environment after he finishes work in the pharmacy of the monastery.

And so if Francesca goes through some difficult moments at work - those moments that we all experience when, for various reasons, the enthusiasm for the mission of the enterprise is very low, and we go to work just because we can't afford not to go there... -, returning home she meets her children, her friends, then she goes to sing in a choir, she dwells in some places that are very different from her work. In these very different places Francesca can be *compensated* for the frustrations of the office, she can let off steam, recharge, take refuge; she can walk in gardens enjoying different flowers and air than in the company. This means, among other things, that companies "consume" precious capital that they do not pay for (family, friends, associations), but that make their workers able to work and sometimes even be creative and happy (a sense of taxes can be found here).

Just like Francesca, Father Bernardino has moments when he has no desire to go down and sell herbal teas and spirits, he also experiences being in a bad mood and having conflicts with his colleagues in the shop. But when he returns home he finds himself living with companions who are very similar (if not identical) to the monks with whom he works. But, and these are the most complex and interesting cases, sometimes Father Bernardino not only doesn't want to go to the pharmacy, he doesn't even want to go back to lunch and dinner in the community. He would also need a place where he could get compensated not only for the tensions at work but for the tensions in his community and his whole life. Unlike Francesca, Father Bernardino, however, may not have "compensating spaces" where he can, in a natural and healthy way, take care of the *misalignments* he senses in that specific phase of his life.

Sometimes he manages to stay in church to seek an intimate dialogue with God, who remains a large compensation space when the others have been exhausted, or if they have never existed. But, as we know, in some moments, generally the decisive ones, if you need some air that's different from the only one breathed in inside that community, even the voice of God ends up being enveloped by that same consumed air, and it no longer speaks. In strong charismatic experiences, when one gets misaligned from the community it is very difficult if not impossible to manage not to feel a misalignment with God, too. Crises would be too simple, and therefore not very interesting, if, together with the relationship with the community, the relationship with God that that community has taught us to know, love and recognize were not also in crisis.

The most common and serious crises therefore arise from a syndrome of encirclement, because every place is nothing more than a variant of the same single place. And, not infrequently, leaving the community appears to be the only way to be able to breathe again and not die.

In reality, these situations that are so common are the manifestation of something much more radical and important. Adult life inside an identity-creating community in which we entered in the age of the wonderful providential ignorance of young people, almost always takes *the form of leaving the first community*, even when you remain in exactly the same room and in the same canteen as always.

To understand this statement, which may seem paradoxical or excessive, it is necessary to look carefully at the nature of the relationship between a vocation and the community in which the person is necessarily born, grows and matures.

The community, every community, even of the most free and open type, carries out the function of a *pedagogue* (St. Paul). There comes a day when those who have received a vocation feel the urgent need to greet and thank their pedagogue for finally managing to live as adults, that is, to leave the first community to become something different that neither they themselves nor anyone knows yet. Sometimes you leave by *staying*, at other times you leave by *leaving*. But you always have to leave if you want to return. You can leave for good (even if you stay in the same house) and never come back. But you can also return: many do, and save us every day by coming back to our homes, when perhaps we no longer hope for it.

These departures and these returns generally take the form of *exile*. Exile in Babylon was a decisive stage in the history of salvation. That forced exit from the Holy City of David, the destruction of the only temple of the true God was the time when Israel also made an extraordinary leap in her spiritual experience. The people of Israel understood, in their flesh and without having wished or sought for it, that it is possible to pray to God without the temple, that he remains the true God even if he has become a *defeated God*. That we remain in the community of the covenant even when we leave the promised land. They got to know another great culture and other gods; they were infected by other narratives, some beautiful ones among them, too. Without the exile, without that contagion, we now would not have some splendid biblical books, we would not have inherited the verses on the "suffering servant of YHWH". The Bible tells us that it is possible to return from exiles, and that from that *remnant that returns* a child can be born in a manger one day.

You can live well as an adult in the same place of your youth if community life becomes an experience of returning.