

THE IMMUTABLE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ORATORY

There are two characteristics of the life of the Congregation of the Oratory which are considered so essential to our unique identity that they are called “immutable”: 1) common life without vows, founded on the bond of fraternal charity, and 2) the autonomy of each Oratorian house.

COMMON LIFE WITHOUT VOWS

“The Congregation of the Oratory was founded with only one bond, that of mutual charity, and was not bound by any vow, oath, promise, or bond of this kind. It is held together solely by this bond of charity.”

Constitutions of the Confederation of the Oratory, n. 9

Common life without vows is a confusing idea for many, because it means that the Congregation of the Oratory does not fit neatly into the standard, traditional categories of the Church. Most Catholics are acquainted with diocesan priests, who are ordained to serve in a particular area under the direct authority of the local bishop. The priests who served at St. Peter’s from its founding until 2005 were diocesan priests. Many Catholics also know religious priests and brothers, who belong to Institutes of Consecrated Life (e.g., Franciscans, Dominicans, Brothers of the Sacred Heart). They embrace the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, by taking formal vows.

Oratorians, however, are neither diocesan nor religious. As a Society of Apostolic Life, we live an intentional community life without vows. St. Philip was not trying to found a new religious order; he was seeking to reform and renew the life and ministry of priests in his time and place. To do this, he borrowed elements from religious life, resulting in a hybrid form of community life for priests and brothers.

St. Philip was adamant that Oratorians must not take vows, but that they freely embrace poverty, chastity, and obedience each day. It is a fragile form of common life that requires maturity and dedication to live well; it depends entirely on fraternal charity.

CHARITY, THE ONLY BOND

“The Congregation follows the primitive Christian community in that its characteristic power consists not in the multitude of its members, but rather in mutual knowledge - whereby there may be regard for the well-known faces - and in the true bond of love, by which those who are of the same family may be bound together through the practice of daily customs.”

Constitutions of the Confederation of the Oratory, n. 11

As St. Philip did, Oratorians look to the early Church for inspiration. The ideal of the post-Pentecost community united in the bond of charity, worshipping together, supporting each other, and evangelizing, is expressed in the famous passage in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42-47). Having experienced his own “Pentecost”, St. Philip shows his spiritual sons that it is still possible to live this way.

Oratorian communities, with a few notable exceptions, tend to be small. This is necessary in order to know each other well, to develop and maintain relationships as brothers. It is impossible to do this with very many people at once, so the ideal size of an Oratory is probably about 7-8 members, no more than a dozen.

Since Oratorian houses are autonomous and do not transfer members (the topic of next week's article), it becomes possible for the members to forge a real family life by living, praying, eating, and working together over the years. Strengthened in brotherly love, bolstered by mutual support and encouragement, Oratorians then venture forth, striving after holiness and working with apostolic zeal.

THE AUTONOMY OF EACH HOUSE

For a Congregation of the Oratory, autonomy means that there is no central government, no provincial structure or general superior as are found in religious orders. Each Oratorian house is self-governing and answerable directly to the Holy See. Every three years, each community elects its own superior, whose title is Provost, and who is referred to simply as "the Father". Fr. Peter is our current Provost.

The transfer of members between houses is extremely rare, and only takes place in exceptional circumstances. When a man joins an Oratory, he joins a particular house with the intention to remain until death.

Oratorian houses are linked by a common rule, called the *Constitutions*, and each community has been canonically erected (formally established) by decree of the Holy Father. Our Congregation was recognized as an Oratorian house by Pope St. John Paul II on September 8, 1998.

Each house belongs to the Confederation of Oratories, an organ of fraternal assistance and support. The Confederation meets in Congress, in Rome, every six years to consider matters of mutual interest and concern, while still respecting the autonomy of each house.

Autonomy can be a double-edged sword. It allows each community to develop its own customs and practices for living out the Oratorian vocation in a particular time and place - a dynamic family life, always developing. However, autonomy also leaves each house vulnerable to the possibility of extinction through lack of members. This underscores the importance of fraternal charity for maintaining the vitality of the Congregation across the years.