

Identity, intimacy and relationships

Issues of identity and intimacy are critical. When people have a poor sense of identity they tend to have poor relationships and also blurred boundaries. **We cannot live life's afternoon with the tools of life's morning.** Mid life is a time to free ourselves of illusions related to our talents and life's direction. Expectations have to be more modest. It is an age of commitment, and recognition that decisions bring consequences. In old age people can rejoice in who they have become, and affirm what they have done during their life. They can admit it hasn't been perfect, but that they would choose the same life again. It is unhealthy simply to regret or be bitter ("if I only knew then what I know now"). **If an older generation is unafraid to face death, a younger generation will be unafraid to face life.**

If anyone was writing an autobiography, it would be a challenge to determine when to begin or close a chapter of their life. Transitions begin with an ending but we don't always realise it. Endings are often followed by prolonged periods where a person can feel 'all at sea', or 'up in the air'. It is stressful, and there is no express lane! We cannot go back and re-live life, and sometimes we can't even define when we were healed. New beginnings, often unplanned, bring times of transition to a close.

A person has to make choices and commitments. **If we keep our options open and puts off life decisions, life makes them for us!** Freedom means being self-determining, making decisions, choices and commitments. Sometimes people will jump to a commitment in the hope that this will tell them 'who I am' or help avoid change, but it will not determine identity. Life's transitions open the question for us.

A person cannot enter into intimacy with themselves, God or others until they have some sense of their identity, and this keeps changing with the transitions of life. In encountering intimacy, a person first feels drawn towards self-disclosing and empathy with another person ("I want to tell you who I am") while at the same time feeling held back, due to caution and selectivity. Self-disclosure is not the same as intimacy. There needs to be caution even with the closest people. Friends are not frightened by our weakness so we learn increasingly to be at home with them. Friends do not demand that we always be consistent. Friendships are crucial in times of transition when hopes and goals can put a person at odds with the way things are and 'should be'.

As they engage with others, men and women experience self-understanding and intimacy in different ways. Studies highlight that men normally meet around a task and when it is done, they cease to come together. If a man phones another man with an invitation to lunch, most often the response will be 'why?' If a woman calls another woman with a similar invitation, the usual response will be 'when?'

Women enjoy talking things over. They value friendship with other women greatly because of the understanding and emotional support they receive. They also appreciate the opportunities they have to explore together, the inner world of personal experience and meaning. Women often experience men as being too reluctant to share emotions. The bonding between men has often more to do with solidarity than self-disclosure. Men are usually more hesitant to discuss with other men, issues of personal weakness or vulnerability.

Many men also find gratitude and affection difficult to express. Men often say they feel pressured by a woman to reveal more of themselves than they feel comfortable with. Men sometimes see a woman's concern and worry as interference and 'mothering', while women often think an agreement has been reached with a man, only to be disappointed.

Intimacy demands a sense of vulnerability because a person has to show weakness and neediness. We need such life-giving relationships and to do so, we need to make time in our lives to nurture and sustain them. One of the greatest obstacles to intimacy is workaholicism, where work becomes the be all and end all. Then a person ceases to find adequate time to pray, to reflect, to share, and to relate.

Spiritual awakening is marked by an intense spiritual desire, sometimes experienced dramatically, but usually, gradually. Each of us has to confront ourselves as spiritual persons recognising that we have choices and that these are informed by values and commitments. Spirituality, like sexuality is awakened and can be repressed. The language of the mystics reflects this link. So often these writers speak of passion, yearning, longing, unquenchable thirst etc. St Augustine says it cannot be satisfied. Spirituality is what a person does with this longing, and happiness is learning to enjoy living with it. Every person must be able to face himself or herself in true solitude which leads to love and genuine intimacy, because its spiritual goal is contemplation and its social goal is love and compassion.

Our PFG life gives us an opportunity to exercise love and compassion. But our spirituality is 'one legged' if this outreach is not nourished and sustained by genuine intimacy with God. This experience is reflected in our own relationships. The deeper our intimacy with another person, the richer will be our capacity to love, to forgive, to care, to be considerate, to be tender and compassionate, to sacrifice ourselves. This journey starts with knowing ourselves and entrusting ourselves to others.

It is a challenge in community (our 'call') such as our Passionist Family Group, to move beyond the polite stage with one another and grow towards true intimacy, where we can know and be known, be ourselves and allow others to be themselves. In this experience we discover God amongst us. "Where ever two or more are gathered in my name, there I am amongst them". Relationships are all there is, and they are what PFG's are about. PFG's are not about monthly activities, but about people relating. They are about learning to love and be loved.

Questions

- a) What barriers to intimacy exist in your life?
- b) What can you do to reduce the influence of these barriers in your life?
- c) Think about a close friendship you have. What first drew you to this person? What holds you together now? How have you managed the ups and downs that are a part of any friendship?
- d) Is there a symbol, the words to a poem or song or an image that captures the heart of this friendship?
- e) What has this friendship taught you about yourself?
- f) How has this friendship opened you to others?
- g) How is this a gift to your Passionist Family Group ?
- h) Would you sell everything to gain the "treasure in the field"?