

# Whose Am I?

## A SPIRITUALITY OF COMMUNION

by  
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I'd like to begin with a question: Who among you here are in a relationship?

I see that my question made many of you smile.

I don't know what are in your minds right now. Some of you may be thinking: *"What a way to begin a talk."* Or perhaps you said to the one seated right next to you: *"What a question. Isn't that rather personal?"* Was there some kind of hesitation in you as you thought to yourself: *"Should I raise my hand and so admit to myself and declare in public that I am in a relationship?"* Or did you raise your hand but were quick to add a la Facebook style: *"Yes, but it's complicated."?* Or instead of raising your hand did you raise a point for clarification: *"Define 'relationship.'"*?

Seriously, I was expecting more hands raised. In fact, I was expecting all of us to be raising our hands. After all, are we not all **"in a relationship"**?

We are all related to others: to our families, to our friends, acquaintances, colleagues and associates, and to a whole lot more.

Oh so I meant that kind of relationship! And you thought it's something else. Perhaps that's one of the signs of our times. Mention the word "relationship" and almost immediately we think of the kind of relationship with a special someone or a significant other, the kind that we would do well to speak about only in private conversations and never in a convention like this one.

The fact is: We are human persons. And part of our being human, nay more, an essential part of our being human is our human relationships. We are social animals, as Aristotle would put it. We have the natural propensity not only to live together in groups or in societies but more so to connect or relate with others inside as well as outside our societies.

We are by nature **relational beings**. To be human is to be relational, to be interpersonal. Our human relationships define us as human persons.

The French existentialist, Gabriel Marcel, has a beautiful expression on this. (My brother priests here, I'm sure, will still remember their Philosophy.)  
“**Esse est co-esse.**” To exist is to co-exist. Existence is co-existence. Such is Marcel's Philosophy of Communion or Intersubjectivity. We are not only beings-in-the-world but more so beings-in-the-world-with-others.

In fact, in Tagalog we have a word corresponding to the Latin “co” and that is “ka.” The moment we use it as a prefix and attach it to a word, notice how we are almost immediately connected to another. Ex. “*katabi*,” “*kakilala*,” “*kaibigan*,” “*katext*,” “*ka-FB*,” “*ka-chat*,” “*ka-viber*,” etc.

We exist and co-exist with others. We are involved in a number of relationships.

Now there's something more here.

So far we have been talking of only one dimension of our relationships. That's the horizontal dimension—the realm of human relationships. There is another dimension—the vertical dimension—the realm of the divine. We are in a relationship not only with each other but also with the One philosophy refers to as The Totally Other. We are related to God. In fact, as human persons we are in a relationship with The Three Divine Persons.

We have a beautiful word for this wonderful reality: **COMMUNION.**

In keeping with our celebration this year of the Year of the Parish as a Communion of Communities, PCNE 2017 has chosen a fitting theme for this Working Session: COMMUNION WITH JESUS: “Apart from Me, you can do nothing.”  
The title: “*Kapit Ka sa Akin, Hindi Kita Bibitawan*”: A Spirituality of Communion. (That certainly sounds very familiar especially for the followers of the never-ending teleserye “Ang Probinsyano.”)

What is a Spirituality of Communion?

This beautiful phrase comes from St. Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* at the close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

Our Holy Father writes that “the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings” is this:

“To make the Church *the home and the school of communion*” (NMI, 43).

Today, more than ever, humanity needs unity. Every individual person, every people, every nation desires unity. This is one of our deepest longings. If people

were more united than divided, world peace would not just be a dream but a reality and wars would simply be a thing of the past, a distant memory.

But what does “make the Church *the home and the school of communion*” mean in practice?

Our Holy Father warns us that “our thoughts could run immediately to the action to be undertaken” and so tells us that “that would not be the right impulse to follow.”

Before making practical plans, we need *to promote a spirituality of communion*, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained, wherever families and communities are being built up. (NMI, 43)

St. John Paul II proceeds to give four marks or signs of a spirituality of communion and then ends with a clear & distinct note on the need for a deep spirituality before we plunge into a series of activities.

Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, “masks” of communion rather than its means of expression and growth. (NMI, 43)

More than the “doing” part, we would do well to establish the realm of our “being.”

Allow me to share with you the fruit of my prayer and reflection on this Spirituality of Communion.

I call it a **PREPOSITIONAL SPIRITUALITY OF COMMUNION**. By “prepositional” I refer to three members of that part of speech—the lowly preposition—which we oftentimes take for granted in grammar and so do not make it to the top five of our list of the 8 parts of speech. These are the prepositions IN, WITH and FOR.

## **BEING “/N”:** IDENTITY

The Catholic understanding of communion is rooted in the mystery of the Blessed Trinity.

Communion comes from the Latin word *communio* [*cum* = with; *unio* = unity]. The Biblical word for it is **KOINONIA** – a Greek word that means “being one with another” and includes meanings such as “fellowship,” “solidarity,” “participation,”

“sharing in common.” It refers both to Christians’ participation in the life of God (vertical dimension) and to the communal life it creates (horizontal dimension).

Koinonia in essence is the Divine Trinity. The Trinity is The Koinonia of mutual relationships and love. It is not only our model of koinonia but, because of the Incarnation, is the very koinonia in which we live. We are called to share in the very unity which the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit share. The Three Persons in the one God in communion with each other in The Community of love. Through baptism God invites us into the life of the Trinity: we become sons and daughters of the Father, brothers and sisters of the Son, and temples of the Spirit. And through baptism in which we die and rise with Christ (Rom 6:8) we become part of his body (Rom 12, Eph 4:15-16). In koinonia we are drawn into the divine life and by God’s grace into a new life with one another as Church, as Community of God.

This is why “the domain of communion (koinonia) embodies and reveals the very essence of the mystery of the Church,” as St. JOHN PAUL II writes in his Apostolic Letter.

Communion is the fruit and demonstration of that love which springs from the heart of the Eternal Father and is poured out upon us through the Spirit which Jesus gives us (cf. Rom 5:5), to make us all “one heart and one soul” (Acts 4:32).

In the mind of St. John Paul II this is the first and most fundamental mark or sign of the Spirituality of Communion:

1. A spirituality of communion indicates above all ***the heart’s contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us***, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us.

And, thus, we understand. Just as there is no spirituality without God, there is in the same vein no true Koinonia without the Blessed Trinity. There is no horizontal dimension of communion without the vertical dimension. There is no Church without God’s In-dwelling, no Community of Disciples without the mystery of the Trinity, no Body of Christ without Jesus, the Head.

We cannot give what we do not have. We become *channels* of God’s grace only to the extent that we are first of all *vessels*. We cannot hope to be an *apostle* like St. Paul proclaiming the Gospel to the postmodern world unless we learn to be a *disciple* like St. John, the beloved, who at the Last Supper rested his head over the heart of Jesus. We cannot become instruments or builders of communion if we are not first and foremost in communion with the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

Jesus declares that clearly using the metaphor of the vine and the branches: “Whoever abides in Me and I in him will bear much fruit, because apart Me you can

*do nothing.*” (Jn 15:5) The contrast is striking: Abide *IN* Him vs. apart *from* Him. Abiding in Jesus we yield a bountiful harvest; apart from Him we rot and fossilize. “*IN HIM* we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28); apart from Him we die.

Only one thing is necessary: **DIVINE INTIMACY**. This is meant to be for all of us our top priority!

We need to recover our identity in God. I’m sure you would agree with me that we are living in and through a time of spiritual crisis. This is a time when many believers and even religious leaders and we educators and evangelizers of the young have lost our sense of identity. The question we would do well to confront is not simply “*Who am I?*” We all know that the answer to this existential question simply goes beyond all gathered data to be found in CVs or 201 files as well as whatever list of functions and job descriptions.

More than asking “*Who am I?*” we are invited today to ask ourselves: “*Whose am I?*”

Recall the claim God makes of us: “*I have called you by name. You are Mine.*” (Is 43:1)

We belong to God. We are not only educators and evangelizers; we are *His* educators and evangelizers. We are not simply channels of communion; we are *His* channels of communion. In a word: We are *His*.

You know very well that one of the favourite worship songs of young people nowadays is the rock band Casting Crowns’ “*Who Am I?*” The answer to the question is the ending of the song: “*I am yours.*” Those three little words are full of wisdom. Let us make them our own.

## **BEING “*WITH*”: SOLIDARITY**

The Church is the Body of Christ.

A number of scriptural passages point to this mystery.

### **1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 27**

“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

## Romans 12:4

“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

## Ephesians 4:4-6

“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

These passages need to come alive in our hearts! As we live IN Koinonia with the Blessed Trinity, so do we live in koinonia WITH one another.

This is for St. John Paul II the second mark or sign of the Spirituality of Communion:

2. A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith **within the profound unity of the Mystical Body**, and therefore as **“those who are a part of me”**. This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them **deep and genuine friendship**.

Every other member of Christ’s Body is a part of you and me.

Personally, this idea of unity in spite of diversity never fails to amaze me. Let me do what is called Phenomenology of the Body with you.

Here’s a scenario:

*You board a bus or a train on the way to school. The train is filled to capacity. As you try to make a stand and keep your balance with the train gradually picking up speed, a fellow passenger standing in front of you steps back and his foot unintentionally lands on yours. Feeling the pain you cry out, “Ouch!” or “Aroy!” That person looks back and asks you: “What happened?” What would you say in reply? Which is the more natural or spontaneous thing to say: “You stepped on my foot!” or “You stepped on me!”?*

An American would say: “You stepped on my foot.” So will a Frenchman or a German or an Italian or a Spaniard in his/her mother tongue.

A Filipino instead would say: *“Tinapakan mo ako.”* “You stepped on me.” So will a Vietnamese or an Indonesian in Bahasa or a Timorese in Tetung or a Cambodian in Khmer.

Notice the interesting commonality and contrast? A Westerner or Occidental tends to view things in a compartmentalized or analytic way. *“That’s my foot you stepped on.”* An Easterner or Oriental especially an Asian tends to view things in a more wholistic way: *“That’s me you stepped on.”*

The French existentialist Gabriel Marcel makes a fine distinction between two expressions: 1) *“I have a body.”* 2) *“I am my body.”* And then he states that my body is not just an object that I possess or an instrument that I use. My body is an extension of my self, an essential part of my subjectivity. So saying, I not only have a body: *I am my body.*

When my nose itches, it is I who feel the itchiness. It is I who shed tears and not just my eyes. It is I who smile and not just my lips. When I cut my finger, it is not only my finger but the whole of me that is in pain.

We have a Tagalog saying, a *kawikaan*, for that: *“Sakit ng kalingkingan, dama ng buong katawan.”* The pain of one member of a family is the pain of the entire family. The loss of one member of a community is the loss of the entire community.

Thus it is for the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. St. Paul writes about the deep and true connection we have in the Body of Christ: *“If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members share its joy.”* (1 Cor 12:26)

This is the Spirituality of Communion. The communities may be different from one another and all the more so are the individual members of each community different from one another, *“the community of believers is of one heart and mind”* (Acts 4:32)

*A story is told of a Jewish rabbi who was conversing with two of his friends. The rabbi asked one of them, “How do you know when the night is over and a new day has begun?”*

*His friend replied, “When you look into the east and can distinguish a sheep from a goat, then you know the night is over and a new day has begun.”*

*The second was asked the same question. He replied, “When you look into the east and can distinguish an olive tree from a fig tree, then you know the night is over and morning has come.”*

*They then asked the rabbi how he could tell when the night is over and the day has begun. He thought for a time and then said, “When you look into the east and see the face of a woman and can say, ‘She is my sister,’ and when you see the face of a man and can say, ‘He is my brother,’ then you know the light of a new day has come.”*

## BEING “FOR”: CO-RESPONSIBILITY

When we talk of sacred moments and sacred places, there are few more important than the table. It is there where we enjoy best the company of our nearest and dearest ones, our families and friends. To sit at table with someone is symbolic of a deeper reality: a unity of mind and heart, a desired communion or oneness of life.

No wonder the selling line of san Miguel Beer has gotten stuck in our minds: “*Iba ang may pinagsamahan!*” A more universal truth, of course, is: “*Iba ang may pinagsaluhan!*”

In the God and humankind relationship, the place of communion likewise centers on the table—the sacrificial altar. Our Lord Jesus has transformed our human experience of dining at table into a liturgical celebration of our friendship with Him. He offers us His very Body and Blood as our spiritual food and drink. The Eucharistic meal allows us to remember the mystery of God’s nearness to us and His desire to share His life with us.

To take part in the Eucharist is to remember why and how Jesus shared it with His friends. “*This is My Body given up for you. This is My Blood poured out for you.*” He extends the challenging invitation to us to be a people who offer our broken lives as we seek His blessing, to be His disciples following a direction that will mean pouring out our lives. He asks that we do this with the same unconditional love He offers us.

Our participation in the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup asks of us the same self-giving. As our Lord Jesus gives Himself as gift to us, we are called not only to share Him with others but also to be ourselves gifts for others.

There is no such thing as “my” bread. All bread that is blessed and broken is meant to be given and shared.

As educators and evangelizers of the young, we are gifts bearing THE GIFT that is Jesus and helping them realize that they are likewise little gifts that are meant to be shared.

Here are four one-liners that succinctly capture our life-story.

God CALLS us by name.  
He CLAIMS us as His own.  
He CONSECRATES us.  
He COMMISSIONS us to go and proclaim the good news.

God SINGLES us out from the rest.  
He SEALS us in His heart.

He SETS us apart.  
He SENDS us on a mission.

Here then is the third mark or sign of the Spirituality of Communion according to St. John Paul II:

3. A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a “gift for me”.

The spirituality of communion also includes the constant proclamation of the Gospel to all peoples. The Gospel is “a gift meant for all, and to be offered to all with the greatest respect for the freedom of each one . . . . It is a grace which fills us with joy, a message which we have a duty to proclaim.” (NMI, 56)

And finally, we get to the last mark or sign of the Spirituality of Communion mentioned by St. John Paul II:

4. A spirituality of communion means, finally, to know how to “make room” for our brothers and sisters, bearing “each other’s burdens” (*Gal 6:2*) and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy.

This spirituality of communion extends beyond the Church into the whole of humanity. Jesus identifies Himself with the poor and the needy, with the little, the last, the least and the lost: “Whatsoever you do to the least of My brothers, that you do unto Me.” (*Mt 25:40*)

Communion calls for co-responsibility. And that signifies the ability to respond to the needs of others in our communities. My neighbor is my responsibility.  
“*Kapwa ko, mahal ko.*” “*Kapwa ko, pananagutan ko.*” “*Kapwa ko, sagot ko.*”

These are not mere slogans but are meant to be projects of life.

On that note, let us consider the third of the defining characteristics of the Philippine Catholic Schools Standard Project (PCSS):

Every Catholic school, rooted in the Church as communion, provides an experience of Christian community. It is distinguished by collaboration, co-responsibility and solidarity. Members of the school community actively engage parents and their families, alumni, and other sectors of civil society in meaningful partnerships to make Catholic Education responsive to the challenges of the contemporary world.

One of the oft-quoted tweets of Pope Francis goes:

“Let the Church always be a place of mercy and hope, where everyone is welcomed, loved and forgiven.”

How do we provide an experience of Christian community animated by the Spirituality of Communion?

May I offer some ideas in broad strokes on this.

We need to experience perhaps an intellectual conversion, an internal revolution, a reorientation of the mind, a paradigm shift in terms of BEING IN (Identity), BEING WITH (Solidarity) and BEING FOR (Co-responsibility).

It seems to me that the framework called for in our times is not the Either/Or construct which is based on the principle of mutual exclusivity and elimination but the Both/And construct which is not about making compromises but about seeking what the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer calls a fusion of horizons:

## 1. BEING “IN”: *From Doing to Being*

We have unwittingly become postmodern Marthas anxious and worried about so many things and have forgotten “the better portion” that Mary has chosen. Only one thing is necessary: Divine Intimacy. That, we have said earlier, is meant to be our top priority. We can be contemplatives-in-action, super-apostles who make time to sit and be still at the feet of the Divine Master. Divine Intimacy offers us the grace of unity that dispels the contemplative-active dichotomy.

The late Archbishop Fulton Sheen, esteemed as “the modern apostle of the pulpit and of social communications” never wearied in saying to his fellow priests when invited to preach their retreats: “Our priesthood is essentially Eucharistic.”

I believe it is equally true to say: “Our religious life is essentially Eucharistic.” “Our Christian life is essentially Eucharistic.”

A life that is essentially Eucharistic signifies a life that is centered on Jesus, our Eucharistic Lord.

We would do well to regularly ask ourselves:

What is our life’s center? Are we still living God-centered lives?  
Are we truly pervaded by the Eucharist? Is it truly the nourishment we live by more than the things of this world?  
Do we still gaze upon the Host in the Holy Mass with immense love?

Do we still value our early morning Mass celebrations and the opportunity to offer therein our own lives as an oblation or sacrifice?

Or have we fallen into the traps of superficiality and routine or have contracted the disease of excessive activity that Pope Francis calls *Marthalism* and eventually lost the fervor so characteristic of our earlier years of Christian or religious formation?

## 2. BEING “IN”: *From Scholarship to Friendship*

We teach young people fear of and love for the Lord. We have institutionalized this ministry or apostolate of education with different titles: Christian Education, Religious Education, Christian Living, Values Education. This is very commendable. But we can fall into the trap of treating these courses like any other academic courses and even demand more from our students in terms of academic requirements. I keep on reminding our students of Theology that God is more than just an object of study; He is a subject for deep intimacy. We can form our young people with a both/and paradigm shift: to strive primarily to know *about* God and **ultimately to know God**, and so to make that leap **from an institutionalized to a personalized way of relating with Him**.

The Christian education we give our students can have another paradigm shift: **from moral obligation to filial devotion**. We can do so much to help them appreciate the Holy Mass more than just a schedule they have to keep or an obligation they have to fulfill out of fear: fear of God’s punishment or fear of our displeasure. We have long been trapped in this “moral oughtness” paradigm and have unwittingly passed it on to our charges in our schools. *“You have to go Sunday mass. You ought to attend the school weekday mass. You should be present for our institutional mass.”* The long-term effect of this hard-sell imposition is disappointing. Many of our graduates feel they have likewise graduated from this obligation and would intentionally skip masses on Sundays. *“I’ve had enough of it for so many years. Quota na ‘ko. Give me a break!”* Students in the US are even more daring as to sport t-shirts that declare: *“I survived Catholic school!”* What went wrong? Well, perhaps, the value was taught but not caught. We can help them discover the beauty of the Holy Mass not simply as a communion with a Divine Friend and their participation in it as an expression of their love and devotion for Him.

We can also look into certain structures we have established along this line. Thinking out loud for example: Could we operate with **merits instead of grades** for purposes of evaluation? Could we have acts of social responsibility to accompany attendance at Sunday mass that is recorded and checked through those little cards that students ask us priests to sign after the Mass?

The point is this: More than simply a set of religious or academic requirements to be observed, Christian life is a relationship of friendship with God to be valued, sustained and preserved.

### 3. BEING “WITH”: *From Strangers to Brothers and Sisters*

Let me offer 7 Principles for a Spirituality of Communion that would help us see and value all the more the beauty of every person, including ourselves:

- Every person bears the image of God, his/her Creator.
- Every person is naturally and basically good.
- Every person is a unique and unrepeatable gift.
- Every person is an end in himself/herself, never simply a means.
- Every person can and does commit mistakes.
- Every person lives fully as he/she gives himself/herself freely.
- Every person is blessed and is called to be a blessing for others.

### 4. BEING “WITH”: *From Competition to Collaboration From Rivalry to Solidarity*

Notice how our giant TV networks bank on this relational dimension of our being human. Look at their names: *Kapamilya. Kapuso. Kapatid*. But there is no communion among them. In fact, what we see is the opposite: a competition that grows fiercer every day.

It should not be so with our educational institutions. We all strive for academic excellence, for higher standards. But we would do well to eliminate any form of fierce competition that runs contrary to Gospel values. How beautiful it would be if we could have a communion of school communities working towards a common end. We commend CEAP for this. We can even look into our high school and collegiate basketball and volleyball leagues which could be reinforcing rivalry more than solidarity. (*So then: less of labels like blue or green or red or yellow?*)

### 5. BEING “FOR”: *From Individual Spirituality to Communal Spirituality*

For the past 20 centuries of Christianity, individual spirituality has prevailed in our formation to and experience of faith. It has been the “educational principle” which has molded us to be who we are and where we are now, and which we now employ in our educational institutions: the individual person continues to be the one who journeys towards God, and the community helps the person on his or her path.

The Spirituality of Communion offers us a new principle in our journey towards God: from an Individual Spirituality to a Communal Spirituality. More than just focusing on “my” sanctification, I assume the responsibility of striving also for the sanctification of my brothers and sisters.

The programme for holiness becomes communal. It is no longer just “between me and my God.” It is a joyful and festive “we.”

**“TOGETHER, TO GET-THERE!”**