

A Closer Look at One Experience Consecrated Men and Women in the Same House

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Life in a gender-mixed community, what grace and challenge! We are pleased to share with you the fruit of this experience, which has been lived in the Marie-Jeunesse Family for nearly thirty years,¹ and which of course is still ongoing. Our average age is still relatively low (33 years), and we have not yet exhausted our discoveries about the beauty of the relationship between men and women in community!

Where Do We Come From?

We come from a culture in which equality between men and women, at least in principle, is self-evident. On this point, we have reaped the fruits of our predecessors, including several men and women religious! As boys and girls, we grew up on the same school benches with the chance to feel that we could all exercise the same trades. It was quite natural that this co-educational experience be extended to community life, as it would be unthinkable for our councils and work and apostolate teams to not be mixed. The vigilance to preserve these two pearls—consecrated celibacy and mixing gender—has always been applied with care.

What was not obvious, however, was how to live our own true colours as men and women in a harmonious way. We are well aware of how all these definitions of specific masculine and feminine traits have historically been arbitrary and discriminatory. Nowadays, attempts to circumscribe femininity and masculinity are often frowned upon, yet we realize that they are indispensable for living together in a healthy way.

Whatever one may say, a woman is not a man; a man is not a woman. If the woman and the man are often an enigma for their own gender, how much more so are they for the other gender...

The Grace of Being Male and Female

This process was mostly developed following the experience of one of our sisters who had never perceived more than two models of femininity: the doll and the tomboy. She had chosen the second option.

One day, following a retreat, she became aware of the femininity that was seeking to emerge from within her and felt the inner invitation to wear skirts. Previously the sisters were almost always in pants. When the other sisters saw this, they said to themselves, "Her, in a skirt?", however they too gradually discovered and participated in this same grace, amazed at the joy, freedom and other fruits that resulted from it.

Mutual Enrichment

From that point on, we became aware of the need to reflect upon our being men and women, which shows up every day in a thousand and one occasions.

¹ Founded in Quebec in the 1980s, the Marie-Jeunesse Family brings together nearly 100 community members, men and women, on four continents, and devotes itself to the evangelization of young people. Our charism is to be there, simply, for the Beauty and the Joy of God!

Living in a mixed-gender community sometimes means experiencing the impact of masculine and feminine psychology. The brother will not necessarily deduce that when the sister says, in a seemingly innocuous way: “Do you find it cold in the car?” which really means: “Can you please close the window!” A sister will not always understand the reason for the uneasiness created by a small remark made with the intention of improving a situation: the brother feels his skills challenged... This is where the reflections inspired by the psychologist John Gray² often offer some valuable help.

A mixed-gender environment offers above all a great mutual contribution in terms of complementarity. If a sister is asked for news about the house for which she is responsible, she will answer by giving news about every person who lives there; the brother will instead talk about the activities, the number of people who come there, the missions, and so on. These two attitudes are necessary and complementary!³

With time, brothers tend to espouse qualities that are “fatherly” in nature and they strive to make their way forward in life while sisters focus on qualities of understanding and on fostering a sense of stability. One difference between genders is that brothers are more naturally turned towards the outside, towards discovery. They help keep the doors open, and that is an asset for the mission. The sisters appreciate the support of the brothers, who sometimes help them to de-escalate and de-dramatize certain situations.

The sisters spontaneously focus more on experience, on the heart, on the interior... The brothers in that way learn not only to do things for God, but to take care of God, to express their love for God more explicitly. They learn certain skills with respect to the “presentation” of things, such as a centre-piece for a meeting or the design of the chapel for liturgy. They discover how to focus more on the “other”, especially in regards to the “little ones.” (Lc 17:2) Finally, the brothers also learn to pay more attention to what is happening within themselves, to go inside, to welcome their emotions.

A Treasure to Protect

Mixed-gender environments require a daily adjustment, a certain form of inculturation. This daily confrontation with “the other” is a powerful springboard for opening oneself up to the All-Other and receiving from Him our own identity. It follows that this daily challenge also requires of us to give ourselves the means to preserve the beauty of consecrated celibacy. The Marie-Jeunesse Family, it seems to us, has always taken the challenge of attraction between men and women in a mixed-gender community very seriously and consequently, we have developed the capacity to confront this sensitive issue with clarity of thought.

Among the concrete means adopted to do this, there is what we call the “rule of three,” that is, always being three people in the various situations of daily life, either for the mission, for work, or for daily tasks such as for shopping, etc. Our community’s formation activities also seek to educate members about open and healthy friendships, to live transparency and vigilance, to grow in emotional maturity and always to place ourselves before the Lord, to whom we commit ourselves first and foremost. But the most effective way of protecting this gift of mixed gender is

² Cf. especially: *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, New York, HarperCollins, 1992; version française : *Les hommes viennent de Mars, les femmes viennent de Vénus*, Montréal, Édition Logiques, 1994

³ Cf. Étienne Vetö, « La vie consacrée au défi de la mixité et de la communion des états de vie – L'exemple du Chemin Neuf », *Communio* 40 (5) 2015, 95-102.

being aware of the treasure that it represents: the beauties of our consecrated life lived together in a way that each of us can retain in their personal and community history.

Together for the Mission

We also experience how much a mixed-gender environment is an opportunity for growth in our mission. First and foremost, this reality allows us a greater versatility in our hospitality, which is mainly oriented towards young people from 15 to 30 years of age. In point of fact, a young man of twenty is often spontaneously more at ease in a mixed community than he would be in an exclusively female community. In a world in search of making inter-personal connections, a visiting young woman shared with us that our mixed group offered her all the diversity of a family spirit. We would not be the Marie-Jeunesse *Family* in the same way if we were not mixed!

Second and more to the point, the testimony of chastity is undeniably relevant and meaningful for today. Young people discover with joy, a place where friendship is simple, true and without connotations. There was one day when, a young woman who had been visiting a house, thanked all the brothers of that house for their chaste look which had restored her dignity.

A mixed environment is a grace in and of itself; in its very requirements of its members. Undoubtedly, one of the most beautiful signs of this grace is that we can say, when we are among only brothers or sisters: "We miss our sisters, we miss our brothers!"

For Further Reflection:

Mixing gender has always been present in religious life over the course of the Church's history, yesterday as well as today.

1. What kind of experiences in mixed-gender situations have I had as a religious?
2. How have I been enriched by these experiences?

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