

Conflict

Jesus in our midst

Tension | Community | Transformation

In this utterly relatable reflection, Br. Jack Crowley takes us from an imagined argument - had entirely in his own mind while in the shower - through the complex realities of the tension that marks all forms of community. What if Jesus really was there, in the midst of those conflicts, big and small, that make community so hard? And if that very tension was a force for our transformation?

It was about 5:15 in the morning, and I was in the shower. There was shampoo in my hair, and my eyes were closed. I was busy imagining an argument with a Brother, which probably wouldn't even happen.

The argument was over dried fruit. You see, I had been getting the impression that a particular Brother of mine didn't think I was replacing the dried fruit often enough. (This all happened back when I was a postulant, and my job was to be the pantry monitor. One task of being the pantry monitor was making sure our supply of dried fruit in the pantry never ran out.)

Now, this particular Brother, in my experience, was the biggest consumer of dried fruit in the whole Monastery. One day, that Brother walked over to a piece of paper we kept clipped to a cupboard in the pantry. That piece of paper had a list of tasks the pantry monitor was supposed to do. I noticed my Brother giving the list a long look, then looking at me, then looking back at the list. Finally, he walked over to me and said that refilling the dried fruit was on the list of tasks for the pantry monitor. Then he walked away. It was a simple enough exchange.

And yet, there I was the next morning in the shower, unable to stop thinking about what I should have said to him or what I would say if he mentioned something about the dried fruit again. I can't remember how long this went on or how it resolved, but here I am, about five years later, and I still remember that moment.

There is no denying the fact that life in a community can be tough. Back when I was an inquirer, it seemed like every single Brother warned me about the difficulties of life in community. Of course, I believed them, but there's a massive difference between hearing

about something and actually experiencing it firsthand. Try to imagine thirteen men of all different ages and backgrounds living together in one large house. They all share their meals together, run a church collectively, operate a non-profit business as a team, and sleep in bedrooms the size of walk-in closets. Most of these men have committed to doing this for the rest of their lives. This may sound like heaven, hell, or purgatory to you. I would say it's a little bit of all three!

Life in a community can be challenging, but it is also incredibly rewarding. Living at SSJE with my Brothers has been one of the most profound experiences of my life. In particular, life in community has taught me the value of conflict and how it is an unavoidable yet potentially meaningful and transformative aspect of life.

In all our various roles and time together, inevitably we will grate against one another. We are spending so much time together and making so many decisions, that conflict is bound to happen. This is not an occasional occurrence, it is a day-to-day reality.

The chapter in our Rule of Life entitled "The Challenges of Life in Community" states that, in community life, "tensions and friction are inevitably woven into the fabric of everyday life." This is one of my favorite lines from the Rule, and I find myself repeating it like a mantra on some days. I'm always struck by the choice of the word "everyday." Personally, I might have preferred "weekly" or "monthly," but such terms might not accurately reflect the reality.

Consider your own day-to-day life. Have you ever experienced a day without any tension or friction? Think about all the roles you may be playing in your life: as a family member, as a coworker, as a citizen, as a partner, or as a Christian. When have you ever gone a whole day without experiencing some conflict in at least one of those roles? (Now, if you want to know what it's like to be a monk, imagine experiencing all of those roles simultaneously with the same small group of people).

Whether you're a monk or not, tension is inevitable in relationships. That same chapter from our Rule of Life goes on to say, "tensions and friction are not to be regarded as signs of failure. Christ uses them for our conversion." For me, this is a very powerful and important statement. It argues that conflict can be transformative.

When you experience conflict in a relationship, do you consider it to be a sign of failure? Do you think that the presence of tension means that a mistake has been made? Do you treat it as something to be remedied or overcome? Try to imagine what it would feel like in your own life if your answer to all of those questions was "No." Imagine what it would look like if you experienced conflict as an opportunity. What if God really is using the tension in your life as a means for your own conversion?

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Consider how Jesus responded to conflict within his own community during his earthly ministry. One of my favorite anecdotes from the Gospels comes from the ninth chapter of Mark, where the disciples are engaged in an argument about who among them is the greatest. I find it both comforting and humorous that the disciples, despite being in the presence of God incarnate, are preoccupied with themselves and constantly comparing their status with one another. You would think that being so close to the only-begotten Son of God would result in permanent bliss and solve all human problems, but the disciples prove that wrong! We, like they, remain human.

One of the many reasons I love this passage is that Jesus immediately addresses the conflict. I imagine that he can feel the tension in the air and knows it needs rectifying. Jesus asks his disciples, "What were you arguing about on the way?" Notice how Jesus doesn't ignore the conflict, nor does he start addressing it by pointing fingers. He simply asks a question to initiate a dialogue between himself and his disciples. His question is an invitation to transformation, an invitation to address the conflict and make something out of it.

So, the next time you find yourself reeling from an argument, try to imagine what it would be like if Jesus asked you a similar question as he asked his disciples. What would you say if Jesus walked in and asked you what you were arguing about? Try to envision what he would respond to you as well.

I firmly believe that Jesus is right there in the midst of our most serious conflicts. In fact, I also believe that Jesus is present in the midst of our most petty arguments as well. During times of conflict and arguments, it is easy to push Jesus aside or think that we will simply have to wait to reconnect with him after the problem is over. However, when we do this, we miss the chance to discover Jesus right in the midst of our struggles and to allow him to help us grow through them.

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Think back and consider how God has used previous conflicts in your life for your own conversion. In my time living in community, I have seen this happen many times. I have seen my community get closer together after going through conflicts. I have seen many Brothers disagree over something but have their relationship improve from navigating through that disagreement.

After all, conflict can force us to communicate. This may not always be pleasant, but it is usually helpful. I have been a participant in many difficult conversations during my time as a monk in this community. These discussions can be excruciating and draining, but from my experience, they are worth it. Some of the best changes I have witnessed in our community have arisen from such dialogues. The challenging conversations that may emerge from conflicts aid us in gaining a deeper understanding of ourselves and the

state of our relationships.

I find that one of the best feelings in the world is being able to look back upon difficult times of conflict in the community and have a laugh, knowing that the storm has passed, and things are better now. The Brother whom I thought was admonishing me about the dried fruit has been resting in heaven for about three years. When I look at the dried fruit now and remember the brief time we shared together, I both laugh and cry, reflecting on the full range of experiences we went through as Brothers in community. I can't help but think that in heaven, when we are reunited with our loved ones, we will be able to do the same together again.

Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, did not lead a life free of conflict. He freely and fully entered the maelstrom that is humanity at large. He did so with grace and tact beyond measure. We are called to follow his example every day of our lives. We cannot evade conflict; instead, we must embrace it. When we do so, we also welcome the transformation it brings.

For Further Reflection

Think back: How has God used the conflicts in your life for your own conversion?

Think about your own communities. How have they formed you? What have they revealed about you?

How does your personal, day-to-day life feed into that broader whole of the Church's mission and witness?

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