

# RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

By THOMAS E. CLARKE

IRVING GOFFMAN, a social scientist, has written an intriguing book entitled *Asylum: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. It is a study of what the author calls the 'total institution', that is, 'a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life'. One of the interesting things about the book is that among the total institutions studied, along with prisons, mental hospitals, military barracks, and the like, are abbeys, monasteries, convents and other cloistered residences. The portrait of religious community that results from such association is hardly flattering. The fact that the author draws predominantly on Kathryn Hulme's *The Nun's Story* for his image of religious community hardly helps the case. Still, Goffman's work is valuable as a stimulus to reflection on the nature and role of religious community considered precisely as community. When properly conceived and lived, this form of christian life is far from being the drab, impersonal and totally demanding institution described in the pages of *Asylum*. But if the term 'total institution' is inappropriate for the life of the counsels in community, the term 'total community' is, on the contrary, most apt. It is under this aspect of a total sharing of existence that the following paragraphs will explore the meaning of the religious life as community.

## *The meaning of 'total' community*

The term 'community' is used for a great variety of human groupings. We speak of a community of scholars, a neighbourhood community, the community of nations, and so forth. If community (*koinonia*) is taken as one of those primordial and almost mystical notions expressing what is most mysterious in human life, then it is clear that not all human groupings are equally deserving of the term. The more perfectly an association of humans verifies the idea of community, the less definable it becomes, and the less its character can be caught and expressed by speaking of its pragmatic function. The 'community' of scientists, technologists, administrators and

workers at Cape Kennedy, for example, can be defined, more or less, in terms of specific goals. An element of *esprit de corps* undoubtedly enters into the complexus of relationships; but basically the relationships are such as not to involve the person as person in the same way, for example, as in a close-knit family.

This transcendence of the merely functional or pragmatic in the higher types of human community must be appreciated if we are to grasp the sense in which a religious community is a total community. It is interesting and sometimes amusing to see a religious community struggling to express its identity in purely functional and objective terms. 'What is it that distinguishes us from Congregation X or Y?' Precisely because religious community engages persons as persons with a certain totality, no objective formula will capture the identity of any particular community. The singularity of history, the distinctiveness of a charismatic founder and of a charismatic tradition, and a quality of depth and totality in the relationships which constitute the community, can be no more than hinted at in a verbal formulation.

This may also be the place to comment on another commonly discussed question. In recent years religious have been asking themselves, 'Did we come together to *be* together, or to *do* something together?' Either horn of the dilemma has its shortcomings. If one opts for *being*, he (or the community) is open to the charge of navel-gazing while the people perish of hunger. And it is quite correctly pointed out that most founders and foundresses were seized by a palpable need in their milieu, an evil to be remedied, a good to be achieved, and not by any fondness for being or for being-community. If one chooses, however, a functional understanding of religious community, there are the opposite pitfalls. No community can identify itself as community merely by the kind of work it does. And the temptation exists to conceive and speak of community as a 'means to an end'. This deplorable phrase tends to overlay the fact that a community is not a thing, nor is it merely the sum total of the persons who are its members. Community is a reality of the order of personhood, a value in itself, never to be made a mere tool for the achievement of anything outside itself, however worth while the goal may be.

Probably the option between *being* and *doing* is a bad way of conceiving community. The danger of applying such generic categories to persons and to communities of persons is that one may fail to respect the element of mystery and transcendence. This is not

to deny that, in the explicit motivation or in the enduring style of religious communities, there can be, and are, notable differences from the viewpoint of prayer and action, inner community life and apostolate. One might perhaps see here one of the ways of distinguishing different major types of communities. Surely there is a difference of accent or blend between the communities of the great monastic and contemplative traditions and the post-tridentine congregations of nurses and teachers. It remains, however, that both *being* and *doing* will be inseparable joined in all forms of genuine community, just as they are within the individual human person. For community is nothing but persons related as persons, that is, in knowledge and love. Community shares in the quality of mystery which belongs to the person.

*Religious community: a family?*

The comparison of the religious community with the community of marriage and family raises difficulties for many today. Some would consider that a community of friends, or a scientific or technological team, or a business corporation, offers a more appropriate model. In the traditional image (especially monastic, perhaps) of the religious community as a family or brotherhood living in obedience to one father-figure, who stands both for God and for the community, they see the subtle danger of prolonging the *infantilisme* so much deplored in recent writings on the religious life. Unlike the family, the religious community is made up exclusively of adults. Unlike the family, entry into the community, on the part of all members, is the result of free choice.

There are, certainly, limitations in this model of religious community. But marriage, especially in the horizontal dimension, that is, in the relationship of husband and wife, possesses what the other suggested models (with the exception of the model of friendship) do not: a depth of mystery which finds expression in the related qualities of totality and irrevocability. In this it remains the best analogue of religious community.

Whatever the pressures to which it is subject today, marriage in the christian view, both as a human reality and as participating in the mysterious marriage of Christ and his Church, represents a total and irrevocable sharing of life by two human persons. The term 'contract' is less appropriate than the term 'covenant': and precisely for this reason, that 'contract' suggests a delimited area of function within which the partners oblige themselves to certain modes of

action; whereas the term 'covenant', particularly in its rich biblical connotations, conveys a bestowal of *self* that is in principle without limit. To conceive of the relationship of marriage as an accumulation of rights and duties touching marital intercourse, other signs of affection, cohabitation, financial assistance, and so forth, is to miss the wood for the trees. What gives life to each of these specific responsibilities of married people is that they are the expression and vehicle of a more basic and total relationship. Some years ago, the film *Marty* portrayed with both humour and poignancy the anguish of the typical bachelor drawn towards marriage, yet reluctant to leave behind his pleasant relationships with 'the boys'. Perhaps Marty's basic fear was not so much that he would no longer be able to play billiards or have a few congenial beers in a male environment, but that he would be involved in sharing the *whole* of his life with someone else.

*The conditions of total community*

Just what is meant in this context by the phrase, 'total community'? It conveys range, depth and quality. Unlike the relationship of the team or work-group, total community means that the relationship with the other radiates into the whole of life, with no area excepted. It is a commitment through which the totality of existence is shared. If a man were to conceive, for example, that his choice of a job or of friends are matters outside the marriage covenant, he would not be accepting marriage as a total community. (This is not to say that he will necessarily talk over with his wife the decision to change his employment.) As we will see when we come to speak of the religious community as such, the specific expressions of a relationship of total community and the relationship itself are not simply identical, even though there must be mutual interaction between the two.

Depth is another characteristic of total community. The decision to enter it and the daily ratifications of it differ from other options, even from very important ones, in that they have a certain irrevocability. 'I, John, take you, Mary, for better or worse . . . until death'. The only limits to this kind of engagement are those over which we have no control. So far as the persons making the engagement are concerned, they have placed firmly behind them the possibility of ever being apart, once this consent to be together has been uttered. We know that the Spirit, in the mystery of his providential wisdom, does sometimes introduce separation, usually

painful and often tragic. Death, and certain incapacitating physical or psychological diseases, such as insanity or alcoholism, are some of the familiar modes of parting. But these do not form qualifying conditions placed on the consent itself, and do not reduce the irrevocable character of the consent.

Finally, the *quality* of relationship in total community distinguishes it from all other forms of community, in that the person as person is fully engaged, and the relationship itself is characterized by the unconditioned presence to one another of the partners in the covenant. There are others which demand a measure of mutual fidelity; but because these affect the contracting parties less deeply, the persons involved are less immanent in their mutual pledges. With total community, however, each person brings himself in a qualitatively higher way to the relationship, which is itself completely different from the partial sharings of other relationships. As nothing (*no thing*) can be compared with a *person*, so no diminished form of sharing personal life can be compared with total community.

#### *Personal conscience and total community*

Before moving on to speak of religious community as a verification of total community, two difficulties must be dealt with. The first would question the very morality of total community as described here, on the grounds that one may never morally escape the demands of conscience. Personal conscience, it is alleged, will sometimes lead an individual to disagree with his community. This is perfectly true; but it would be a mistake to conceive that such cases call for a restriction in the basic covenant itself. Far from a conscientious dissent, however painful, being a reservation placed on total commitment, it is an implicit exigency of that commitment, and actually enhances it. I owe it to my beloved community to disagree with it when I see clearly, in the Spirit, that it is not, in a particular action or even in an habitual mode of its existence, walking according to the Spirit. It should also be recalled that the community too, as a corporate person, has its conscience. And just as its commitment to me is not limited but rather enlarged by its corrective function toward me, so my acceptance of life in it as a total community is without limit.

#### *Is total community possible?*

The second difficulty against the conception of total community

is that it demands too much from frail human beings. Since we are not angels, tentativeness is characteristic of all we do, and the deepest human fidelity would seem to be tinged necessarily with at least a faint hue of 'unless'. There is a real truth in the difficulty. Except in death, no human promise is absolutely irrevocable in fact. We can always go back on our word. In addition, fidelity as a virtue or attitude is less a possession to be retained than a treasure for which we strive. We *become* faithful much more than we *keep* fidelity. Nevertheless, there is a real difference between a mere declaration of intention, however serious, and the pledge or promise whose quality is that of covenant and not of mere contract. Though the resulting relationship is shot through with our human frailty, this quality coexists with a certain firmness and irrevocability. It is the simultaneity of this weakness and strength which gives to total community, as a community of covenant, a singular beauty which men have always recognized and always will.

#### *The Counsels and total community*

We have already drawn several implications about religious community as total community. But much more remains to be said. First, we must point out that not every community of prayer and apostolic action in the Church needs to be, or is in fact, total community in the sense described above. This is an important point to realize today, when there are signs that a good number of christians, some of them already religious, are unwilling or unable to commit themselves to a particular total community of the counsels. There are other groupings within the Church within which they can both develop their christian personhood and be of service to others. Once their incompatibility with the religious form of christian life is clear, even if they have, unfortunately, already made profession of it, it will be a blessing for all concerned if they are allowed or persuaded to go another way. Nor should we be overly distressed if, in the coming decades, proportionately fewer christians experience the call to total community within the religious life. And it would be folly if, for the sake of keeping numbers up and staffing existing institutions, the element of total community were to be diluted or compromised.

Secondly, it is through a vowed embracing of the counsels that one enters upon this form of total community. By religious profession a baptized christian pledges to God and man (immediately to the members of his community, more broadly to the entire Church)

that he will share human life in its totality with the group of baptized christians who are members of this community. And the community, in its turn, together with each of the other members, makes the same pledge. It is important to attend to this aspect of mutuality in the religious profession. In recent years, the profession ceremony of some communities has been giving it symbolic expression, with the religious superior, or all the members present, pledging themselves to receive the new member and support him in his effort to live his own commitment.

Just what express form the commitment to total community will take is an important but secondary matter. Traditionally, the triad of poverty, celibacy and obedience has been more common. The reality signified by these three must be present for this kind of total community, even when the formula of profession does not make explicit every member of the triad. It may be worth while to specify how each of the three verify the notion of commitment to total community or a totally shared existence.

I would conceive, first of all, that by the commitment to a celibate life in community I agree to share my human affection with the members of this community. This implies not only that I commit myself to a special love for each member of the community and for the community as such, but that all other human loves in my life are to be measured against this prior commitment to love. My love for the community is not exclusive in the sense that I may love no one else, at least not intimately. It may in fact happen that my most intimate love will be directed to someone outside the community. My love for the community retains priority, however, in the sense that any such particular love, however noble in itself, must constantly be justified, in its beginning and in its enduring presence, with reference to the covenant of love I have made with the community. Here the contrast with the marriage covenant is illuminating. Both the marital and the celibate christian community are characterized by a love that is both particular and universal. Married people are called to love each other and to love mankind. Members of the celibate christian community are called to love one another and to love mankind. But the order of love is different. For the husband or wife, the prior commitment, against which further possible commitments must be measured, is the particular one, not the universal one. For the religious, the opposite is the case: his word of love has been addressed to the community he enters (which stands for him as the Church and mankind generally).

When particular loves offer themselves, they will be received or not according as they conflict with or deepen his covenant with his community.

Total community verifies itself in the vow of poverty as a covenant to share one's material goods, work, talents, and also the corresponding privations, with the members of this community. The particular traditional prescriptions regarding permissions, common life (in the sense of seeking the fulfilment of one's material needs from the community, not from elsewhere), a frugal existence, etc. are simply forms in which this basic will to share human existence finds expression and support in this specific area of human life. Obviously there is a wide range of such particular forms possible and desirable, provided the net result is a totally shared existence.

Obedience is the counsel and vow in which, perhaps, the element of totality in religious community is most prominent and also most challenging. For obedience touches precisely the area of freedom and decision, and what total community is all about is a freely chosen sharing of life in all its dimensions. My profession of obedience is, obviously, not an abdication of my freedom of conscience. It is, however, the expression of a willingness to share the decisions of my life with my community. No area or kind of decision is excepted from this radical commitment to share life with others. How I care for my health, how much I travel, the clothes I wear, how much I pray, what I do with money, what dealings I have with my friends outside the community: all these decisions I have agreed to share with my fellow religious.

### *Some objections*

I am sure that this understanding of the vows, especially the vow of obedience, as an irrevocable and total commitment to share affection, goods and decisions with a particular group of human beings, will make some people nervous. They will recall, perhaps, the stunting and even the destruction of personhood which they have witnessed in religious communities, and they will wonder whether the term, 'total community', is not just a novel substitute for 'surrender of one's own will and judgment', 'holocaust of obedience', 'death to self', in the name of which human beings have been irreparably damaged in their chance for personal growth. How, the objection may be phrased, can total community fail to lead to total institution, in Goffman's sense?

The difficulty is a real one, and would merit a fuller and deeper



treatment than can be given here. Two responses, the second less superficial than the first, will be offered. First, it is imperative, as we indicated when speaking of total community in general, that we distinguish between the basic covenant or covenant relationship and the particular forms in which it is manifested and sustained. The character of totality, irrevocability, absoluteness about which we are talking inheres in the basic relationship, not in the forms. For example, the fact that I have committed myself to share my use of material goods with others does not imply that I have the same diet as my fellow religious, or get my wardrobe from some common tailor. It does not exclude, for example, that there be an understanding that a religious working for a salary in some secular institution would have a bank account, pay certain bills himself, and in general proceed with only rare instances in his life of having to ask special permissions regarding the use of funds. The same distinction between the radical relationship of mutual dependence and sharing between individual and community holds for celibacy and obedience. Cultural and psychological factors will affect just what expressions of radical and total sharing are appropriate. That there will be *some* expression goes without saying, since basic relationships cannot be maintained without appropriate expression. A man who never kissed his wife would, normally, hardly be maintaining his basic covenant with her; but this does not determine anything at all regarding the frequency and regularity of this gesture of love. So with the gestures which express and thereby confirm the love relationship of a religious community. Today, quite necessarily, we are in process of reducing the number and regularity of our common gestures of solidarity. Undoubtedly some individuals and communities will go too far in this reaction to the excessive controls operative in the past, and we will probably have to rediscover that some degree of regular rhythm and of stability is indispensable if any human community is to be lasting. But we have had too much evidence of the tragedies that can result when forms of living are absolutized. Ideally, at least, freedom to change the forms, far from putting pressure on the totality of our basic commitment, is necessary if that commitment is not to become a tedious burden and an irrelevancy.

A more basic response to the objection against total community as running the risk of total institution is simply to acknowledge the presence of this risk, and to say that without it the specific contribution of the life of the counsels in community cannot be realized.

What is impossible to man is possible to God. With the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ something absolutely new has come into the world. Apart from him, and precisely as sinners, we do well to guard our individual freedom against the threat of the crowd. This is precisely what original sin is in the social dimension: it is irreconcilable mutual hostility in which the group threatens my freedom, and vice-versa. It is alienation of the most desperate kind, in which it is impossible to trust one another. While we are sinners, there is simply not the possibility of a total community that would not be in reality a total institution, a destruction of persons (and therefore of community) in the faceless crowd.

It is the hall-mark of the paschal mystery that alienation is healed through the very instruments of alienation. Evil is not so much simply removed as reversed in its direction. The condition of a man's finding the reconciled and reconciling community (apart from which he cannot find the reconciling God in Christ), is that he accept the risk of experiencing the crowd, and in fact experience it. It is such a risk that is inherent in being a christian in the first place, and the risk is intensified when one becomes a religious. I have no guarantee that my community will not act towards me as a crowd, nor, for that matter, can the community guarantee that I will not be an anarchist towards it. Humanly speaking, this total community which is the religious life is an unlikely proposition. It can work only in the extraordinary happening of the will to continual conversion, the will to reconciliation, desired and lived by individuals and by the community as a whole. And because this total community is not natural in the sense in which the total community of marriage and family is natural, its success should always come as something of a surprise. People tend to get discouraged at its seeming to work so rarely and so imperfectly. If we realized how many human obstacles there are to its working at all or working well, we might be more grateful for the enormous contribution it has made to christian and to human life. And we religious might be more grateful for the fact that we are the ones called and empowered to live it. If human beings are made for communion in depth and constancy, then this life of total celibate community, though not the only way or the best way for all, remains a thrilling (because improbable) and secure (because dependent on the power of God) way to realize such communion.