

# HOLINESS AND COMMUNITY

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HOLINESS belongs to the very nature of God. To say that God is all holy is to say that God is God. Yet man can know God's holiness only through his own perception of its effects. He experiences God as ineffable, wholly other than himself, present yet transcendent, immanent yet absent. God's holiness is a weight pressing in upon him and a lodestone pulling him outside himself. It is strangely repellent and peculiarly attractive. It is a mystery. The pagan reacts to the holy with taboos and talismans; the aesthete venerates it at the shrine of art; the pantheist worships it on the altar of the natural world; and the mystic unites with it as with his centre of gravity. Through an act of revelation God set aside a whole nation for his own holy purposes. Because of their election and mission, the jews were endowed with a functional holiness. Theirs was the destiny of preparing the earth to accept salvation, of developing a solidarity responsive to final transformation by God.

With the incarnation, God's holiness was visibly personified and organically implanted in human flesh. In the person of Christ, holiness was expressed in a community of natures and exemplified in the community of persons which he assimilated to his body. By his incarnation, each man's dignity was immeasurably enhanced; and by the revelation of the Trinity, he discovered his deepest personal fulfilment to be within the bonds of community. Wherever Paul on his missionary journeys planted Christ, the rooted seed sprang up in community. The Acts of the Apostles tell of the spontaneous fellowship which was normative for the early christian community. And the rapid proliferation of churches all over the known world bears testimony to the burst of holy energy generated by the earliest communities.

It was always likely that the seed could be choked in its growth by 'wordly pre-occupations'. More surprisingly, it all too often grew up as a rarified hot-house plant. Holiness became the prerogative of a chosen few; the rest of Christendom tended either to forget its communitarian dimensions or to leave it to the 'professionals'. Ironically, it was the great egalitarian and proletarian movements of

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the last centuries, secular and often atheistic, which at least in principle rediscovered the sacredness of the brotherhood of man.

Until recently, the word 'holiness' still evoked a picture of a holy person in the characteristic attitude of prayer. Like a figure in a Flemish painting, the 'saint' was enclosed in his own space, in repose, and apart from the traffic of the market-place. People tended to think of holiness as a phenomenon documented in dusty school-library books of 'spiritual reading', something to be recalled nostalgically along with the feeling which came with the fervour of a good retreat. Sometimes it had lace edges and was lithographed in pastel colours. It was laid away like a souvenir between the pages of a first communion prayer-book and forgotten. Those who did manage to keep alive their youthful fervour regarded vocation to holiness as a confessional secret. Popular manifestations of the religious spirit were thought to be either fanatical or vulgar.

Today, thanks to the liturgical reform and to the response of Vatican II to the spirit of the age, the universal call to holiness has gone out as a rallying cry to all the people of God wherever they are found. It is indeed a communitarian summons which no one can answer without taking another by the hand.

The life of the Trinity is the norm of all community. In God three persons not only coexist in perfect harmony; each one exists by and for the others. The radical receptivity of the Son towards the Father is matched by the radical self-giving of the Father to the Son. The life which they reciprocate is carried by the Spirit in such a fashion that there is nothing received which is not at the same time given. Equality in the Trinity is predicated upon the perfect balance of this dynamic exchange. The balance of total equality, the reciprocity of total openness: these are the absolutes toward which every human community aspires.

In the Trinity, that which constitutes each member a person is the personal relationship in which each stands to the others. God, three persons, is Trinity in unity, intrinsic co-existence. In him two are always three and three are always one. Because Father and Son communicate being, the holy Spirit proceeds as a third. Because the Spirit is the bond of being between Father and Son, in him the two are one. Creative expansion and unitive contraction, this is rhythm of the Trinitarian life. The outward pulsation towards three-ness represents the diffusive character of all genuine community. The inward contraction towards oneness represents its cohesive character. Without both movements, the life-force of community lies as still as

the bloodstream after the heart stops beating.

The whole universe, the earthly reality, the human race are elaborations of the creative expansion of the Trinity. Offspring of the Spirit, all creation is destined, through the integrating action of the Son, to be brought by stages into a hierarchical relationship with the Father. The appearance of man effected the integration of non-rational creation through its subordination to the rational. It also brought creation to the level of conscious relationship. The appearance of God as man reconstituted the human family in a new state of sonship to the Father and re-articulated the correlation between all things. Just as God's communion with man in the incarnate Christ leads to holiness, so God's holiness mediated through the incarnation leads to fellowship in the body of Christ – a fellowship which imitates that of the Trinity. In human and material terms, true fellowship requires a mutual sharing which in turn creates equality. As the agent of the desired equality, the more favoured partner in a relationship must always act first. He expresses his solidarity with the other by voluntarily diverting to him enough of his own substance to cancel the disparity between them. But for God to share his own holiness with man, more was required than a gratuitous act of philanthropy. Only the transference of his very life to man could achieve the communication of divinity to humanity which would establish the parity of fellowship. By assuming man's nature, he would pour into the human race what was wanting to man of divinity; so that, having emptied himself, he could receive back, in his body, what was wanting to God of humanity.

The Son's act of identification with human nature so impressed St Paul that he urged his philippian converts to imitate the attitude which prompted it. 'In your minds', he said, 'you must be the same as Christ Jesus'. Then, in solemn words, he intoned the great incarnational hymn of kenosis which describes Christ's going forth from the perfect community of Trinity to join the fellowship of men.

His state was divine  
Yet he did not cling  
to his equality with God  
but emptied himself  
to assume the condition of a slave  
and became as men are.

Because this hymn is so familiar, so rich in doctrinal content, so indicative of the faith of the early Church, it is often explicated

without reference to its less exalted context. One is apt, therefore, to miss the analogy Paul makes between the role of Christ and that of the christian. Here is one of the many instances where Paul uses the exhortation to imitation on the grounds that one's being in Christ requires that one act the part of Christ. Word has evidently reached him that strife, competition and conceit are threatening the unity of the community at Philippi. He appeals to the philippians, at the level of their faith-identification with Christ, to reproduce among themselves the spirit of self-effacing love manifested by their Lord in his becoming man.

If your life in Christ means anything to you, if your love can persuade at all, or the Spirit that we have in common, or any tenderness or sympathy, then be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind. . . That is the one thing which would make me completely happy. There must be no competition among you, no conceit; but everybody is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of his own interests first, but everybody thinks of other people's interests instead.

It is significant that Paul's rationale for unity is founded upon theological rather than humanistic considerations. He sees Christ as paradigm as well as paragon. As Christ is, so must the christian become. The humility which brought the Son to voluntary servanthood is the same humility which is to be expressed in mutual reverence and the willingness of each to be at the service of the other.

As man, Jesus, the Son of God, discovered himself in a badly distorted society. His own chosen race had little natural grace to recommend it above others. Despite its election as the people of God, standard-bearers of the promise, Israel's solidarity was founded as much on pride or need or greed as on its faith in God. And the true Israel, the poor and hopeful who looked to God, had yet to awaken to its brotherhood. It was among these that Jesus began to reconstitute the society of man in a holiness patterned on his own. He began on a modest scale to form a small pre-salvation enclave based on a new ethic equating love of neighbour with love of God. Gradually, he expanded his disciples' horizon by word and by example, all the while preparing the content of their faith for the coming of the Spirit. His lessons in fellowship became increasingly explicit, increasingly revelatory of the true nature of his relationship to them: his washing of their feet - 'I have given you an

example'; the meal in which he became their food – 'This is my body given for you'; his death for them – 'truly this was the son of God'. And still they remained individually undistinguished and collectively weak. Yet neither the lessons nor the saving acts of Jesus were ultimately lost on these men, for God raised up his Son, the head of the saved, the first-born of the dead, and sent his Spirit to burn through the last layers of their obtuseness. In a baptism of fire these men were transformed, empowered by their risen Lord, sanctified by the Spirit and received into communion with the Father and with each other in the body of the Son.

In the first letter to the corinthians, Paul considers the principle of integration by which the different members of the community are joined. Again, he takes his cue from his perception of a theological reality – the distribution by the Spirit, the one creative source, of a diversity of spiritual gifts within the community. The plurality and complementarity of these gifts are likened to the parts of a human body, each of which, in performing a useful service for the others, is vital to the living organism. In this, his first explicit reflection on the question of christian solidarity, Paul seems to be saying that interdependence based on mutual need is at the root of community.

This interdependence of need is also reflected in the cultural history of man. Ancient covenants and treaty relationships between persons and nations, Caesaro-papism, Feudalism, the Guild system, trade unions, the Communist Internationale, the League of Nations, the U.N., the World Bank, the Common Market – each of these institutions exemplifies the pauline thesis. But Paul has second thoughts about the true nature of community. In chapter thirteen of the same letter, he says, in effect, 'Yet I will show you an even better foundation on which to base your unity'. And images fail him as he breaks into the famous hymn to love.

In terms of social structures, only the most idealist schemes have attempted to embody the dream of a community founded on love. Yet because christianity itself is the embodiment of a divine ideal in human form, such schemes, perishable as they are, have a perennial charm and validity. It is good that from time to time human society should attempt to absolutize itself in a community of love. These stirrings toward Utopia are the hopeful tremors which herald the final day when the world will be metamorphosed into the kingdom of God.

The notion of communitarian holiness finds a congenial ally in contemporary thought. A man is what, through the quality and

nature of his relationships, he has become. Yet what a man is, interacts with that which determines his own becoming in such a way as to modify it in turn. It is in the dialogue of relationship that a person's identity is shaped and given the specific content which makes him unique. If a man's becoming goes forward in a creatively interacting community of loving persons, he will be fulfilling others even while he is being fulfilled. It is said in Genesis that man was made in the image of God. When Christ became man, the image of God was reflected back to the Father in all its clarity and splendour. Since the incarnation there has been no goodness, no love that is merely human. Everything which enhances man as man and maintains him in his humanity belongs to God and is holy. Therefore St John can say, 'anyone who lives, lives in God'. The very exchange of love is productive of holiness.

A man capable of community, open to growth through mutually creative fellowship, is a humanly richer person than he could have been in voluntary isolation. The measure of his human fulness determines the measure of his potential for holiness.

From a communitarian standpoint, the very bonds are holy which unite individuals in a relationship of love. The more consciously responsive the community is to the presence and action of Christ in its midst, the more definitively is it drawn into the body of Christ. Both the strengthening and the elaboration of these bonds in Christ generate a holiness which is more pervasive, more efficacious in its transforming potency, than the collective holiness of the individual members. A holy community is truly a 'divine milieu', an ambience charged with an intensity of life which is palpable.

In the personalistic setting of community, individuals hope to satisfy a variety of specific needs. These may be reducible to three: the need to be known and to know; the need to be saved and to save; the need to be loved and to love. These needs typify not only the young, but everyman, and they can be satisfied only in a communitarian situation.

*To be known and to know.* The marriage relationship, the family, the community within which people live and work: these are the circles where individuals look for the human recognition their dignity requires. It is each person's ambition to find another who will know and understand him; and having understood, will accept and ratify what he is. To be known, to have another enter into one's experience, is to have an ally. There is a natural tendency to narrow one's circle to those whose knowledge is constructive,

sympathetic, careful of one's sensibilities. In human relationships it has been observed that one partner tends to receive more than he can give, while the other must give without receiving in equal measure. To be built up by another to the point where one is secure enough to break out of the narrow circle of sympathetic friends is to come of age. It is an awakening which causes a person to reach out in understanding towards another. In the moment he centres his interest in someone else and attempts to project himself into the self-understanding of his fellow, a man is engaging in an intuitive operation analogous to the faith-act by which he knows God. He is opening himself out towards the knowledge of the *Thou* whose holiness is present in every other-centred act.

*To be saved and to save.* In existentialist terms, to be saved is to be rescued from meaninglessness, oblivion, non-being. The fear a child experiences in being lost plagues him in subtle ways through life. Even in the face of certain dissolution almost everyone suspects himself to have a value which transcends time. The urge to personal continuity struggles with the evidence of death. Being saved is being chosen, selected from among others, singled out for special care in all the small human ways. Part of the experience of salvation involves an awareness of one's precariousness and the feeling of grateful relief when more is granted than one has the right to expect. Each individual craves this kind of salvation. To every man he meets, he says, in effect, 'Will you save me, recognize my value, see me as someone important?' To save another, one must be among the 'saved'. It is even a form of personal salvation to save another, to arm oneself with a companion against the last threat. Yet all merely human power to save is pitifully limited, and hopelessly ineffectual against the entropy of time and death. The partial salvation a man finds within the community of wife and of offspring who will perpetuate his seed, and the community of friends who will perpetuate his memory, makes him yearn the more for a self-conscious immortality. His experience of being valued, rescued by his fellow-man from insignificance, opens him to a heartfelt hope for definitive salvation. His finite power to save another reveals to him the will of God to save in Christ.

*To be loved and to love.* Being loved comprehends being known and being saved, but is more than both. The experience of love is essential even to normal physical growth. Because love is at the source of life and must be forthcoming for life to grow, two people collaborate to dispense enough love to sustain the one new person.

The system of interlocking dependencies by which a family is united brings love to maturity. The self-giving to which the privilege of being loved prompts one is the full flowering of the communitarian life. A person educated by love, who turns in gratuitous love towards another, is a minister of the Gospel, a bearer of the good news of Jesus Christ.

The holiness of a community may be measured by the same test of faith, hope and love which is applied to the individual. In so far as the community has faith in its members that they in turn may believe, values them that they may learn to hope and loves them that they may be empowered to love, it is holy. Communities which have produced such an environment of holiness exercise a prophetic function. They preview and point the way to a reality which will fully materialize only in the end-time.

Wherever men are, in their families, their work or leisure communities, their religious communities, they gather as the people of God. Whatever else they do, they must answer the universal call to holiness. For most this means preparing themselves by preparing their communities to become a people worthy of their calling. The ideal communities must be made to evolve out of the real ones – the clubs, the unions, the sports teams, the classes, the political parties. Often the preparation seems a merely worldly task of humanization, yet only to the degree that man's society is humanized can it be divinized. Even in its secularity, a this-worldly-oriented structure has an incipient holiness by reason of the human goodness it has harnessed. It is a goodness which belongs to the Son of God as man. Who is to say that the Red Cross, General Motors, the Democratic Party, the Peace Corps, in the measure that they achieve a human good, are not holy or are not susceptible to a greater measure of holiness? To reject this potential for sanctification is to sabotage part of a plan whose history goes back to creation; it is to squander the fruits of the incarnation. There is no doubt that it is a holy, a God-oriented task to actualize the natural potential of the earth's and God's people.

The means to this end are within the reach of every christian: doing one's job with care and creativity; accounting the good of others above one's own; bringing an awareness of the divine into the human task; seeing the human task as a work of the body of Christ. In the final analysis the quality of one's love is the transforming factor.

In love the Son of God identified with a sinful community,



becoming one with it even in its sin. The christian in his secular community, even in his religious community, also identifies with much that is sinful. He must do so with love. Paul affirms that the power of Christ to mediate holiness in the sinful situation is also the christian's. In the communities he founded he considered the pagan spouse of a christian husband to be holy. By reason of their conjugal relationship, even their children were saints. Just as the illicit consorting of a christian with idolatry blasphemously joined Christ to an idol, so the relationship formed with another by one living in the body of Christ joined that person to Christ. Paul saw every christian as a priest, mediating the union of God and man.

The role of the christian in the actual community where he finds himself is still to mediate this union. For Christ, the breaking down of the wall of separation between his person and the human community required the sacrifice of his life, the putting to death in his own person of the sin which was the wall. The christian's priesthood requires a like willingness to die. He must be ready to sacrifice himself, to enrich others at his own expense, to lay down his life inch by inch for the members of his community. By this extreme and simple measure of being poured out, the christian fulfils his earthly-divine task of sanctifying his world.

St Paul, drawing out the consequences of living in the christian community, enunciates a love ethic which situates all morality in relationships. One's behaviour in the body of Christ is always predicated on the good of the members. The greater the freedom, the individualism, the human richness a christian develops in the community, the more he is called upon to adapt his freedom, condition his uniqueness, fit his gifts to the condition of his neighbour. If the performance of a harmless action upsets his neighbour's relationship with God, he refrains first, then educates him for greater liberty. He is ready to take up his brother's burden of sadness, or sin or ill-tempered disposition, or to enter into his success, or talent, or good luck. He appreciates and respects his confreres' alien cultural or religious traditions, and he values both their narrow and large-minded perspectives. He meets each man on his own terms with the same kind of sensitivity which the incarnate Christ brought to each of his human relationships. He learns that the communitarian dimension of the universal call to holiness requires heroic sanctity.

If the holiness of the human community seems a wishful dream, a flight of fancy from the overpowering realities of war, crime,

famine and hate, it should be recalled that it is the efficacious will of One who knows man's potential and is in touch with each man's reality. While the parable of the mustard seed bears no triumphalistic interpretation, it does claim with authority that the kingdom is something which is becoming, which is growing from very small, apparently unpromising beginnings. That the seed of the kingdom is already planted is the clear meaning of the incarnation. Christ, the kingdom come in person, grew as man among men to provide a new body for mankind to grow into. Whenever a community grows into this body, the attracting, integrating energy of holiness is released, and the world moves forward towards the Father.

At the end of time, when the last summons to the earth has wrought its final plenitude, the world will be revealed as the holy Church of Christ, and the Church will advance in her bridal splendour to meet her Lord. With the consummation of the world, the nuptial community of the body of Christ will be sealed in love. Then the Son, forever man, will bring man, forever son, into the eternal communion of the Trinity.

If we live by the truth and in love, we shall grow in all ways into Christ who is the head, by whom the whole body is filled and joined together, every joint adding its own strength, for each separate part to work according to its function. So the body grows until it has built itself up in love.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eph 4, 15-16.