

# METANOIA AND COMMUNITY

By OLIVER ELLIS

**I**T IS THE WORST of times. Our world is full of violence and war. It is full of insincerity, of dishonesty, lies, hypocrisy. It is the age of propaganda and slogan, of doublethink, the cliché, cynicism, the facade, the manipulation of the news media.

It is the worst of times; it is the best of times. There is a passion for truth as never before. As never before an admiration for the genuine, the straightforward, the sincere, the honest answer; a longing for authenticity, for integrity, for self-criticism.

It is the worst of times for the Church, deeper plunged in crisis than any time since the reformation. A house divided against itself cannot stand. But worse than the division is that controversy is without charity and the factions are strident.

There is irreverence for authority and a use of authority that damages its own credibility. There is a belittling of structures both necessary and proven. There is manipulation of these structures which devalues their potential for service. Some move violently out of reach of these structures amidst recrimination and a disturbing of those they leave behind. Some drift away bewildered by the turmoil and incertitude. Part of the Church is gone underground, and is so removed from the community that its fervour is in danger.

It is the worst of times. Law is good and legalism bad, but to whom can we go to distinguish them? The Spirit is better than either but we are not used to listening to it. Some fear the Spirit and some who claim it are obstinate and arrogant. The Spirit's gift of obedience is devalued, tarnished by those without the humility to receive it and by those who invoke it in unnatural isolation and in militarist connotation.

There is lack of patience and the unnecessary trying of patience; lack of meekness and the exploitation of meekness; imprudence and sloth masquerading as prudence. Too much talk, not enough prayer. Rhetoric without action. Dialogue that is sterile because its atmosphere is barren of humility and trust.

For the Church it is the worst of times; it is the best of times. It is a time of renewal.

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We remember where it all started. We remember it was a task we undertook at the bidding of the Council. God willed it; the Church had said we stood in need of renewal. With eagerness and confidence we set about it. It was a time of promise. We were being challenged to dare to live in the truth. Where truth is God is. And so we had reason to hope.

But men do not easily receive the truth because it causes pain and because they have much falsehood in themselves. So immediately turmoil is inextricably contained in our search for renewal. Some will panic at the pace of change and will be tempted to invoke repression and inquisition to resist it. But truth says that christians are a pilgrim people and so there must always be the turmoil of their moving on. Reluctance and discomfort in vacating familiar places. And unusual discomfort in our generation because we have been too long camped in the same place.

The pilgrim's life is largely provisional. And so we learned that many of our problems had neither ready nor once-for-all answers. We should have to do with a theology more open-ended and less certain than we should have liked. New situations raise new questions. And so the present reshaping of ministry and liturgy both to the demands of the times and of the gospel. And so the redefining of authority and the Church's search for a posture and proclamation convincing to our times. And so an end to legalism and clericalism, to the over-centralized and the bureaucratic and the sacramentalistic. Because these do not help.

For long we were in the fortress, but now we are in the desert. And this is good, because it is where truth would have the Church. (We remember the exile was necessary for the salvation of Israel's message.) The closed atmosphere of the fortress provided security, though it was false security; and cosy exclusiveness, though this was non-evangelical. The disaffected were easily isolated and silenced in the name of tranquillity and order. Fidelity's sign was rigidity, the party line was followed, criticism was disloyal because the enemy was at the walls.

The truth is that the Church's place is in the world, learning and teaching within present history. The truth is that she exists for the world as surely as the system exists for the individual, as man exists for his brother. The truth is that the Church is God's hand offered to man.

The truth too is that the enemy has long departed the walls. Our threat is not from the hostility we provoke but from the apathy.

The Jesus people are not flocking to join us.

The truth is too that we are disappointed. Bliss was it on that morn to be alive. We look back now with a kind of nostalgia to the early post-conciliar days. We look at ourselves and ask, how did we come to this pass? How do our promises look now?

Did we expect too much too easily?

Some feel disillusioned and frustrated and tempted to say things are worse than before. Many gaps can be pinpointed: lost opportunities, stagnation. Those formerly most happy at the prospects of new times are now those most unhappy at what they feel is the thwarting of change and reform.

There is much bewilderment and confusion. There is flight from religious life and the priesthood on a new and alarming scale. There is the threat of fragmentation. Authority within the community is challenged on all levels. What we felt were basic doctrines are called into question. Ecclesiastical eccentricity and the bizarre are cultivated with deadly seriousness. And yet our setting out was so promising. Our course was set by the fundamental direction given us by the new ecclesiology of the Council. The Church had unambiguously declared and defined herself as the sacrament of the world's salvation, the sign raised up by God of unity and brotherhood on the earth. Our great offer was that we were placing ourselves in all sincerity at the service of the world loved by the Father, ready to meet its deepest-felt and ultimate needs.

Admirable coincidence between what we had to offer as our unique gift and the greatest single felt need of mankind. What has eluded the efforts of mankind we could pre-eminently supply.

The world's greatest need was easy to identify. It is a recurring theme of much of modern art, literature, cinema, pop songs: man's alienation from himself and from his fellowman because he has failed to discover a meaningful world of stable relationships.

Much in modern life has struck at true community and leads to the separation of people at their deepest level. Marshall McLuhan tells us that in the global village 'our new environment compels commitment and participation. We have become irrevocably involved with and responsible for each other'. But the frustrations of contemporary life point to the need to go beyond a superficial fellowship in the search for communion, and beyond any scientific success which loses its meaning in the face of death. The world desperately needs the authentic vision of community which the Church strives for and knows through revelation.

Only in community is our meaning and identity to be sought. That human nature is not individualist and that its inner reality demands communal relationship: all this is truism. What is special to our position is first the fuller insight we have into this truth, and secondly our capacity to meet and fulfil its exigencies. In line with this awareness of the world's great need and our own capacity to answer it, we set about the task of renewal, of examination of all that might hinder our effectiveness. We set off upon a crusade of reform of the structures, the administration, the thousand externals of church life, with *Ecclesia semper reformanda* pinned to our banners.

But were we naïve? It is juvenile to believe that all questions have answers. Not all problems have solutions, certainly not ready ones. No age has had all its questions answered. Did we promise too much; above all did we miscalculate the cost? How long and difficult was the road we had to go?

Did we forget that we too were *semper reformandi*? And so called to unceasing self-examination and renewal, to criticism of all we readily accept and take for granted.

Community will not be achieved without great cost. But those who have been called to the kingdom, to that fellowship established by the pains and the cross of Jesus, have implicitly expressed their readiness for sacrifice and suffering.

Because it is here that man's salvation is achieved, genuine community is a thing of surpassing value. Like other precious things, it is not purchased without great cost, whether it is to exist among members of a family, citizens of a country or the nations of the world. Community is born in the humility of admitted fault and the readiness to empty oneself of guilt. It develops in the patient expectation of shared joy. Its roots go deeper into the human than men normally dare to go, and into the darkness of questioning that men fear to probe.

Eventually it is in our living of the life of Jesus that we proclaim the promised brotherhood of the kingdom. The proclamation of the Church is essentially this: belief in the kingdom, in its promise of human harmony, in the eventual liberty, peace and unity of man, despite the discouragement of human history, despite all the unfreedom, malice and threats that work against it, even the ultimate unfreedom of apathy, despair and death.

From the Acts of the Apostles we see that the first apostolate of the early christians was their sense of community, their love for each other. Men had living testimony before them that God through

faith in Christ had come to gather, to unite and to establish a community of love. Man could see his real future lived before him and made present to him.

The real tragedy then of our failure at renewal goes beyond any personal disappointment and pique. The world has been failed if we have lost our bearings, been sidetracked. If our talk and promise went no further than rhetoric. While we wrangle or sulk or lose interest, all humanity, the servant of whom and the sacrament of whose salvation we profess to be, goes unserved.

Renewal can only be conceived in terms of the holiness of Christ. It can only be measured by the degree to which we respond to his call and invitation.

Christ's invitation was to the kingdom. This was his essential challenge. From that day Jesus began to preach the kingdom. 'Repent because the kingdom of God is at hand'. This was no abstraction. Jesus uses many stories and parables to concretize its urgency. Come to the wedding; compel them. This was the challenge urged on the rich young man. Another man was refused time off to bury his father; others were urged to hate their families now that the kingdom was offered to them.

This repentance, change of heart, change in our ways of thinking and looking at things, is urgent and decisive. New thought-patterns, new life-styles are imposed. *Metanoia* means to undergo a transformation, to make a choice so decisive that our lives will never be the same again. Without this decision we cannot receive the kingdom or its offer to be made wholly human. We cannot grasp the good news that reality is ultimately love. Unless we accept it ourselves we cannot be the heralds and instruments of the kingdom. Or so experience God's love in the offer that it bursts forth from our personality and spreads to all around us.

To hear and answer this call is to open oneself to the world and to one's fellowman in hope, love and joy, and so to be on the way to human wholeness. Our individual and communal identities are now hidden in the mystery of Jesus. When we experience God's promise of humanity made new in the brotherhood of the kingdom, new awareness of community comes to us and the formation of new relationships follows.

Only when he has received the gift of the kingdom and has opened himself to its demands is the christian free to castigate the timidity, bigotry and arrogance around him without fear and without embarrassment.

But unless we are clear in our own minds about what renewal is, what it is in itself and what it is for, it will come to mean no more than aimless change, superficial adjustment, the general frittering away of time and effort on treating symptoms and the peripheral. We shall be diverted into eddies and sidestreams, even into the cult of the convenient and the comfortable.

As well, we shall have misread the gospel if we imagine that all this can come about without high cost to self. The demands are too radical, too much of surrender and loss of self is demanded, for it to be anything but painful. The whole history of the Church is the story of people claiming to have responded to Jesus' demand for decision, while they have not in fact responded to it. Of people proclaiming to believe all the truths of the faith while hesitating to expose the whole of reality, themselves included, to the fundamental truth of God's endless love for us.

He who has accepted the offer and the challenge of the kingdom is still a man and still shares the common aspirations of mankind. His instincts for community are as deep. He feels the lack of unity, peace and tolerance as keenly. He is as regularly hurt and shocked by the setbacks and injuries that life inflicts on community.

Man is not an individual united casually by his inner limitations or by the curved surface of his planet. He has no meaning except in terms of others. He cannot be defined or grow or maintain his identity except in terms of continuous relationship with other persons, dependence on them and responsibility for them.

Where there is personality there must be a group to endorse the fact; but one can only be truly related if he preserves his identity, individuality, otherness. So tensions arise at the centre of a person's being. Tension between individuality and relatedness, between solitude and communion, between the interior life and life in common. Maturity lies in harmonizing these poles, both of which have been upset by sin, both of which can lead to the withering of true personality and the destruction of real community.

In the mystery of the Trinity the christian possesses the key to this apparent tension between personalism and community, between the refusal to be sunk and absorbed in others and the need to be endlessly open and available to them.

Man is created in the image of God, whose very being is characterized by a community of persons in one nature. Within the Trinity, each person exists with and for each other without shadow of opposition between person and community or any diminution of

their personhood.

Similarly, the human individual will develop in the measure in which he gives himself to others and enters into community with them. From the example of the Trinity, where the greatest conceivable intimacy is reconciled with the greatest possible development and originality, we learn that true human community does not debase the individual or sacrifice his personal development to itself.

Man's inner need for others, his deep-felt call to community, is based on his call to live like God in whose image he is made. Without this insight from revelation, one could have done no more than note the fact, suspecting that it was based on some imperfection of the creature, a burden flowing from his insufficiency. 'What we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, that you may have fellowship with us, and our fellowship is with the Father and his son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that your joy may be complete'.

All the people of the world are now the people of God; but those who are joined together by the love of Christ and by a visible unity of faith and worship have the special responsibility of applying this certainty to the daily life of man. God's redemptive love and goodness is the message carried by his believers; and this, when applied to the community, takes the form of *philadelphia*, love of the brethren. This is based first of all on the faith by which the community lives, faith in the victory of the Lord, on him who has conquered the sting of death, who has revealed the hidden plan of God for the universe, to unite all things in Christ, and who gives certain hope that his followers do not grieve like men who have no hope.

To believe in the message is to believe in the immortal unity of man in the joy of the Father. Jesus risen from the dead has entered into a new way of being which permits him to be present to the community and to form a single person with them forever. There is only one Jesus now, the founder and the community he has called together. It is the community which mediates the Lord to us and links us to the historical Jesus of two thousands years ago.

Thousands living and dead are involved in my salvation. In the community of faith I encounter the memory and meaning of Jesus; with them I meet him in sign and liturgy. My own imperfect belief and my own limited experience I test against the faith of the community past and present. I am heir to their common experience and common reflection, to the answers and understanding of life

acquired through the centuries.

We are people of the future because the kingdom is not yet fulfilled. But it is only by holding faithfully to the past that we can prepare that future. Our hopes depend on the believers of today and on our links with the past. A curious group this may be, the learned and the superstitious, the fervent and the careless; but the kingdom is a net cast into the sea and containing all manner of fish. Whatever embarrassment there may be in this, these are the terms on which fellowship with the Lord in his kingdom are offered to me.

The individual christian is convinced that his life, and the greater whole of which his life is part, is a story being written by a personal God. This is a personal experience; but it is not a private one. His vocation is to be reminder and embodiment of the everlasting community for which all men were born. He is a message-bearer and a promise-bearer. And his promise of community is one that no one can make unless he admits of the incomplete nature of human existence.

We do not claim that all must be christians to be saved. What we do claim is that the Church's role is to be seal to man's efforts and instincts to build a better world in accordance with the one creative plan of God. The task of the Church is to point to the kingdom, to work for the affirmation of love until the day when all will be one. You who were not a people I have made a people, that the world may see that its high instinct for brotherhood is capable of achievement. May see too that the individual develops himself in proportion to the relationships in love which he develops with other persons. That the world may have a genuine and realistic vision of fellowship and sharing in the deepest values of human living and human history.

The Church is the one community which can accept even death as a uniting reality. It knows of an everlasting community, can reach into the ultimate kingdom and make promises befitting the transcendental nature of man.

It knows him who came to bring together all God's children, scattered far and wide. It knows that there is a supreme link for the human community, a supreme force of cohesion. Those things which are the enemies of community and corrode it, isolation, death, our inward springs of evil: these are realities that Christ destroyed by his cross.

To bring salvation to the world is not the Church's task. This task was given to Jesus and faithfully he has carried it out. All mankind



has been redeemed. Every man is born into a world that has been saved and reconciled to God. There is only one destiny for all mankind; all must work out their salvation in fear and trembling. All stand in need of God's mercy and all who call upon his name will be saved. Grace is freely available to all, so that we can neither say that the breathing of the holy Spirit is confined to the limits of the visible Church nor that his breath is more effective when channelled through ecclesiastical structures. The christian hopes for his own salvation through participation in the one history of mankind, in solidarity with those incorporated into Christ and with the world remade in him.

As Jesus was the man for others, so the Church he has gathered exists for mankind. The few are chosen for the many. By declaring her faith in the future kingdom, the Church affirms the human search for freedom, life and community, in the joyful certainty that life is worthwhile and its successful outcome certain. In God's name she says *yes* to man's quest for humanity. The Church is also criticism, criticism of man's refusal to hope, to love, to move out of slavery. She says *no* to man's attempt to make his provisional state absolute, to make any stage in his final resting place.

The Church is not the kingdom, but its sign. As sign, her rôle is to work for the conversion of man to truth, to freedom, to his future in the kingdom. As sign, the Church does not exist for herself. Neither are christians called that their own salvation be made more easy, but for God's service in and for the world. To be a sign lifted up before the nations, the sign of a visibly united people awaiting the coming of the Lord. Their relation to the world is a relation of service, just as the Church lives because of the service of Jesus Christ, the great servant of God.

We profess to serve mankind. It is not unreasonable that a servant be required to meet some real and deep felt need. We should understand with what disinterest we shall be regarded if our concern seems to go no further than our own domestic affairs, religious education, propaganda, tinkering with the minutiae of ceremonial, the mouthing of platitudes, old or new.

We remember what high promises we have made, what lofty hopes we raised by these promises. We remember that in these promises was included our own promise to conversion for the sake of the kingdom.