

# KOINONIA FOR PEOPLE OF THE EXODUS

By FRANK ELVEY

I FIRST MET VANN in April 1985. In the heat and dust of Khao-I-Dang refugee camp, we shared some food and some hopes in a small thatched hut. That was at the border separating Thailand and Cambodia. I had just arrived from Australia and was preparing to teach in another camp at Phanat Nikhom. Picking up the trail of my prospective students, I quickly discovered that Khao-I-Dang was a vital link in the chain of journeys that led to Phanat. Everybody talked about Khao-I-Dang. I was keen and wanted to deepen my understanding of those I would be with in the months ahead. So when the opportunity to visit Khao-I-Dang came my way, I snapped it up.

The people there had fled the killing fields of Cambodia and a past that held bitter memories. They were people who had been torn apart and who now clung to frail hopes as they waited for a better life. Victims of unending and futile fighting, they still bore the scars of life under Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. Though Khao-I-Dang, like the country they had left, was a treacherous place, they found some fragile security there. But it was not a place to remain. It was a prison where people hid in holes at night to escape those who robbed and raped. A place where those called 'illegals' (having arrived after a set date) constantly feared being rounded up and shunted off to a future more dreaded than the present. Vann, like most in that camp, set his sights on life in the Western world. He wanted peace and his family would do all they could to pursue the path already trodden by their relatives in Australia.

Vann and I met a second time that year. With my work and my stay in Thailand coming to an end, I was doing a round of good-byes. I set out for Khao-I-Dang with a friend who hoped to meet Vann. Not having his address, I wondered on the way how we might find him in a camp holding thousands of people in row upon row of look-alike huts. Would I remember how to reach his house? Would any of the other people I knew there know him? I need not have worried. He found us!

It was late December and in the camp a tinsel-laden Christmas tree sat uneasily amidst bamboo and rice. After Sunday Mass, Vann came up to me and greeted me like a long lost brother. I was surprised to see him at the church but he told me that he liked going there. The gathering at Mass was not vast, but was much larger than I had expected given the small number of Cambodian Catholics. Many were only recently baptized; many others, like Vann, came because they were attracted by these Christians and their God. It was a young Church, newly born in this place of captivity.

Once again I shared some time and good company with Vann's family. But walking through the guarded gate on my way home, I knew I was leaving a place that should never have existed—a symbol of division and of human tragedy impossible to measure. I returned to Australia—to family and friends, to stability, security and plenty. I did not expect to see Vann again.

The third time we met, we laughed. It was two years later at Melbourne airport. For many years Vann and his family had walked with death and they had lived. As with so many people deprived of control over their own lives, their changing fortunes had rested in the hands of unseen powers. A policy change in Thailand had meant that they were now officially counted as 'refugees' and so had become eligible for resettlement overseas. With proficiency in English and close relatives already resident in Australia, they were quickly accepted by the Australian immigration officials.

Other Cambodians, who had preceded Vann and his family, offered support and care and handed on the cultural keys necessary for a new kind of survival—life in a world set apart from their own. For the past five years, Cambodian Catholics scattered around Melbourne have gathered once a month to share the Eucharist and their lives. I remember being deeply moved at one such Mass soon after Vann's arrival when, with tears in his eyes, he spoke of his journey and of what God had done for him. It was what we might in theological language call a story of salvation. It was a unique story as each of our lives is. But, at the same time, it was a shared story, retold many times over. And so, Vann's family became part of this small Christian community growing within Australian society, a community sharing memories of a particular way of life (that of Cambodia) and of a particular experience (that of being refugees). I have seen Vann a lot since then.

I want to use this brief account of how my journey meshed with that of Vann's family as the basis for some reflections on the Church as communion (*koinonia*). My contact with refugees has brought into sharp relief two questions about communion: can the idea of communion give us more than just a cosy picture of Church? Does a church seen as communion have any significant role to play in the healing of our broken world? I want to answer both questions with a heartfelt 'Yes!'

In answering these questions I will stress three ways of looking at communion—each drawn out of the story of my encounter with Vann's family. Firstly, the story speaks to me of Church as an open and outward-moving community. Secondly, it points me towards a universal Church that walks with those most in need. And thirdly, it urges me to act as a member of a local Christian community that offers to those around it an alternative way of life.

*A koinonia Church as an open and outward-moving community*

Refugees come to us in different ways. For people living in countries of first asylum like Thailand, they are usually unwelcome. And so refugees may be called 'illegal immigrants' or 'displaced persons'. They are very often confined to camps like Khao-I-Dang. In days gone by such camps were a compassionate response to an emergency, aimed at feeding, clothing, sheltering and protecting. But they have somehow become an absurd new form of political institution, serving vested interests, isolating refugees from those around them, and cultivating the progressive breakdown of already fragile societies, kept locked behind barbed wire and guarded gates.

For those of us in the Western world, the refugees we meet are mostly people like Vann who are officially welcomed into our midst. They come seeking new homes and a new life. There are many others we don't meet. And they are not just the ones in the camps overseas. They are amongst those turned back at our borders, our airports, and our docks, or held in our detention centres. Or they live on the run with false names and identities. They are fleeing and, in moving towards us, they call on us to respond. They ask us to open our hearts, our homes, our Churches, and our countries. We are given an opportunity to welcome them into our world.

At the same time, their coming to us gives us a chance to be drawn into a world different from our own. We can do so quite simply by accepting hospitality that is offered. I found that in the camps and in Australia too. Vann's family and others like them,

who have walked with death, have shown me a way of life. I often marvel at how their deep desire for peace, born out of suffering, has been sustained by a tenuous yet unshakeable hope. Eager to spread the word of life they first heard in the midst of conflict, they have broken open for me what it means to live by faith and hope in a God of the living—the God of our nomadic ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Such people invite us to listen, engage, and perhaps hear some Good News ourselves.

So it is that, with my Cambodian friends, I have found a Church that is a community. When I speak in this way, I am not just thinking of a gathering of like-minded or like-hearted people who come together to share the Eucharist and to support and care for each other. That is surely important but it is not what I would call Church. Church is much more than that. With these people I have been brought into an outward-looking community, a group of people keen to welcome others to their celebrations and at pains to share the good things of their lives and their culture. It is an open, missionary Church born out of oppression. Now liberated from the confines of a camp, Vann and those with him are free to open their lives and their world to other peoples.

This suggests an answer to the first question I posed: can the idea of communion give us more than just a cosy picture of Church? I believe it can. I have just described how refugees ask us to let them into our world and at the same time invite us into theirs. Neither of these movements is easy and we very often say 'No' to both the request and the invitation. But where the meeting does take place it is where we have communities that are open, have something to offer, and are ready to receive. So we might do well to understand Church as communion as a dynamic understanding of Church—as communities that are open to those coming in and able to move out to others. This means seeing Church as a community actively gathering others in as its members are freed from what keeps them to themselves.

We might ask how such a picture of Church as community on the move sits with contemporary understandings of the Church as communion. The problem as I see it is that word 'communion', as it is customarily used when we talk about community, tends to obscure the missionary nature of the Church that I have just described: that is, our calling to move out to others, to invite others in, and to share with them the Good News we have received. But this need not be so!

The final report of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops held in 1985, twenty years after the Second Vatican Council, stressed the significance of communion as a way of describing the Church. The bishops went so far as to say that it was 'the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents'.<sup>1</sup> They were eager to avoid understandings that reduced communion to a purely sociological picture of the Church, so they went on to give an outline of its 'complex' meaning.

In setting out to do this, the bishops began with what we might call the *vertical* dimension of communion, that is 'communion with God through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit'.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, communion is a way of talking about the basic relationship between humans and God. And the *horizontal* dimension of communion, which we usually have in mind when we speak of community, is seen to flow from this loving relationship with the Trinity.

This means that when we look at the Church as a society in the world we are not just talking about community. For we have in mind a very particular sort of community. Communion emphasizes the way God gathers us together as sisters and brothers in Christ, as people who meet to hear the word of God and to share the Eucharist and our lives, being bound together in the friendship of the Holy Spirit. This sort of community actively shares in the life and the love of the Trinity.

In the spirit of what I have said above, I want to stress here God's action of *gathering*. The idea of communion as *gathered* community (for example, at the Eucharist, in a discussion group or prayer group, or engaged in some activity together) is secondary and flows from this. Communion is about how God's people are being gathered together as one family whose members are united with each other and with God. Such an understanding of communion holds onto both vertical and horizontal dimensions.

Further, any talk of communion relies on seeing the Church as the people of God. Often when we speak of the Church in this way, we want to stress the basic equality of all who have been baptized. So the image of the Church as God's people has been important in the discussion of key issues within the Church (such as the ordination of women) and between different Christian Churches (such as intercommunion). On the other hand, some speak of the people of God as a way of setting aside such issues (for example, by using this image to defend the present way that the Church is structured).

Clearly, by reviving this image, the Council has given us a language for talking about ourselves as Church that has been enthusiastically taken up by a great many people. But there is also a problem in all this talk. Because when we speak of the Church simply as the people of God, as has become commonplace, we risk losing sight of something important in the Council's discussions. The Council spoke of the *pilgrim* people of God. In *Lumen gentium* we are described as being gathered together by God into a single people. Like the people of Israel, and the early Church which saw itself as the new Israel, the Church today is a people who are on the way. And so we see ourselves as the children of those brought out of slavery in Egypt and exile in Babylon. And we seek to move towards life in God's home. Such a community can never be quite settled. Like Augustine, it longs for the day that it can rest with God but knows that till then it must move on.<sup>3</sup>

It follows from what I have been saying about Church as an open and outward-moving community that we are looking at the Church not so much as *community* as *community-in-the-world*. This brings us to the second question I posed earlier: does a Church seen as communion have any significant role to play in the healing of our broken world? In answering this, I want to look at two levels of response: the global and the local.

*A koinonia Church as a universal Church that walks with those most in need*

Meeting Vann's family and other refugees raised questions about my own society and culture as I found myself drawn to reflect on a divided world's struggle for unity. The fact that there are refugees virtually everywhere ought make us prick up our ears as a ringing alarm would. It signals deep divisions in our world today. We could, of course, list a vast array of local conflicts that are the immediate source of refugee movements. Vann, for example, fled fighting between rival groups of Cambodians and between Cambodians and Vietnamese. But refugees point not so much to these local issues as to the tragic effects of the way our world operates at the international level. So it was that when I sought to understand why Vann left Cambodia, I very quickly found myself considering the parts played by countries like China, the USA, and the Soviet Union. And I began to look with new eyes at how the poorer nations are pushed and pulled in all directions by the richer nations, the split between North and South. In this way,

refugees turn our minds to reflect on the world and help us to grasp that we live in a world where the futures of all peoples are interwoven.

Vann yearned for peace and that touched my own yearnings. I find that I have been enticed into asking myself uncomfortable questions about such things as my standard of living, the dominant values of my culture, and my government's policies (for example, in the areas of foreign policy, trade agreements, and immigration policies and procedures). As people who have lived through suffering, people like Vann can point us to our hearts and what we desperately desire and are yet to find. Like them we may begin to feel deeply our need for a peaceful world in which all people are neighbours and are valued and loved as such. Here, too, is the stuff of conversion as we come to accept that our affluent lifestyles delay such peace.

This sort of self-searching and reflecting is something I think we owe refugees and all who are suffering because of the way our world is put together. It may be all we can do. It is certainly the least we can do. One thing it does remind us is that we are members of a *catholic* Church that takes in people of every land, language and way of life. We see the effects of division even in our own international community which is made up of all our local Churches. Following an ancient tradition in the Church, we speak of local Churches as being in communion with each other. If this is to have any relevance today, then each of our communities will need to find a way to walk with our suffering brothers and sisters in the poorer countries and regions of the world. The Churches there are a direct link with people we have never met but whose lives depend on us.

This sense of relationship to people far away and the action which flows from it is what I understand *solidarity* to mean. Solidarity is a term that has gained prominence in Church social teaching in recent years, notably in *Sollicitudo rei socialis*. This encyclical links it with communion:

Beyond human and natural bonds, already so close and so strong, there is discerned in the light of faith a new model of the unity of the human race, which must ultimately inspire our solidarity. This supreme model of unity, which is a reflection of the intimate life of God, one God in three Persons, is what we Christians mean by the word 'communion'. This specifically Christian communion,

jealously preserved, extended and enriched with the Lord's help, is the soul of the Church's vocation to be a 'sacrament' . . . <sup>4</sup>

Here, talking about community goes with thinking of the Church as a sacrament, and the call to stand with all peoples, especially those most in need, flows from this. I find here a very rich understanding of communion similar to the picture that the Council painted when it looked to how the Church moves with the world today.

In *Gaudium et spes*, communion expresses how people relate to each other. Every level is looked at: humanity with God, the community of nations, groups within a society, Churches, families, and so on.<sup>5</sup> We are presented with a vision of an evolving world that is being dramatically changed as people and peoples come to depend on each other more and more, a world deeply divided and yet seeking unity, a world in which we are recognizing our responsibility for which way the whole show moves.<sup>6</sup> And in this world, the Church lives as a visible community, showing what God has promised and actively striving to bring this about. Just as each genuine celebration of the Eucharist reconciles and unites a diverse congregation, so too the Church seen as the body of Christ, is to be an effective sign of what God is making of the world in bringing people together as one family.<sup>7</sup>

*Gaudium et spes* holds onto the fact that we are created as different people in relationship. The example given is that of gender—male and female united as one.<sup>8</sup> We might also think of other ways we classify ourselves, the sorts of things we fill in on a census form: name, age, marital status, ethnic group, religion, and so on. Anyone who has ever lived in a community of any sort does not need to be told that people are different. The hard thing to believe is that real unity is possible! Too often we settle for a false unity that downplays our differences or an uneasy truce that despairs of finding any significant unity. Yet community implies both an honest recognition of differences and an ongoing search for better unity. In this sense, our model community is the Trinity—three quite distinct persons, yet one God.

So as members of a universal Church our vision is to be as big as our planet, and to walk with those most in need will mean seeing very clearly the divisions in our world and the differences between people, while working for a unity that is founded on honest relationships at all levels of society. In practice, of course,

this solidarity will be expressed through our action at the local level. But what sort of action?

*A koinonia Church as a local Christian community that offers to those around it an alternative way of life*

Coming back to Australia from the camps, I experienced what so many travellers experience, a sense of being an outsider in my own country. Besides making me feel quite uncomfortable at times, this brought a new sharpness to my view of life in Australia. It meant that for a short while at least I had a view from the edge. That initial feeling of being out of place has long since passed, but the view from the fringe has been aided through spending time with groups of newcomers to Australia. As outsiders coming to a culture I have grown up in, people like Vann offer me a new perspective on familiar and even unquestioned elements of my world. Whether through their eagerness to take on local values and customs or through their desire to retain their own, their presence reveals both the difficulties and benefits that come about when different cultures meet.

I spoke earlier of how Vann's family became part of a wider community of people who shared a common history as Cambodian refugees. A community like that moves out of its own distinctive past and reflects that past in the various ways it goes about things. So I have come to recognize and appreciate not only the delights of Cambodian food and dancing and the distinctive sounds of the language, but also something of the customs, such as bowing, that express the way people are related to each other in Cambodian society. Because a community can give us a taste of different ways of relating, it is able to present an alternative way of life where an individual like Vann on his own cannot.

This has implications for our local Christian communities. Christian community and particular ways of life both go together and stand apart. *Gaudium et spes* reminded us that the Church 'can enter into communion with various cultural modes, to her own enrichment and theirs too'.<sup>9</sup> And by the time of *Evangelii nuntiandi*, ten years later, this coming together of Church and culture is seen as a way of spreading the Good News:

The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times. Therefore every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture, or more correctly of cultures.<sup>10</sup>

Evangelization here means transforming cultures so that faith will be expressed in the life of a group or society, and it means freeing people from ways of relating that take them away from God and from what God is making of the world.<sup>11</sup> So the same document, though very cautious in how it handles the theme of liberation, speaks of the 'profound links' between evangelization and liberation.<sup>12</sup> In this picture, each local Church is to present to the world an alternative way of life—telling the gospel story through the ways the members of the community relate to each other and those around them.

But *Evangelii nuntiandi* also speaks of the gospel as 'independent in regard to all cultures'.<sup>13</sup> This sits rather well with the idea of a community interacting with a culture best when coming from the position of an outsider. Because the gospel cannot be identified with any particular culture, the Church as community will to some extent always stand outside or at least on the fringe of the culture it is moving with. Just as Jesus died outside the gates of Jerusalem, the Church which sees itself as the body of Christ will need to operate from the position of those pushed to the edges of our societies. Those groups that we now call basic Christian communities show us this with particular poignancy.

To conclude, let me add a footnote to the story I began with. Shortly before my ordination eighteen months ago a Thai friend sent me a ring made in one of the camps. It was engraved with the words: 'From friends in camps'. I rarely wear jewellery of any kind but I sometimes put that ring on and often carry it with me. It connects me with people far away—people with a history worlds apart from my own but with whom I share a common future. It reminds me that whatever I am doing in the small corner of the world where I live now, I must keep in step with a vision of what God is making of the whole world. And so it challenges me to make the communities I am a part of open and welcoming. My hope is that our communities may become a sign to the world of an alternative way of relating to that which creates refugees.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the Final Report of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops (Nov 28–Dec 8, 1985), ch II, C, 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Lumen gentium*, nos 9, 48, 49.

<sup>4</sup> *Sollicitudo rei socialis* no 40.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, *Gaudium et spes* nos 1, 12, 19, 50, 52.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, nos 5, 6, 23, 25, 26, 33.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, nos 40, 42.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, no 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, no 58.

<sup>10</sup> *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no 20.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, nos 19-20.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, no 31.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, no 20.